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ABSTRACT

A school district's board of education is a governing body that has the responsibility of creating vision and direction, setting policy, providing resources, and monitoring the results of student achievement initiatives for its district. The board and superintendent must work together as a leadership team for the district, modeling to the staff and community a shared commitment to continuous academic improvement. This book explores the "Key Work of School Boards" framework for systems thinking and action. Chapter 1 presents an overview of guidelines for board-superintendent role differentiation, a description of the Key Work dimensions, and a glossary of educational terms relating to student achievement. Chapters 2 through 9 look closely at the roles of the board and superintendent in relation to each of the Key Work elements. Chapters 10 through 21 present profiles of board-superintendent teams making a positive difference in the quality of education in their districts. This book is intended to serve as a stimulus for dialogue, inspiration for building relationships, and a framework for mutually developed teamwork. The book concludes with a list of resources on board-superintendent relations, notes about the authors, acknowledgements, and lists of publications by the National School Boards Association and American Association of School Administrators. (RT)

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# Team Leadership for Student Achievement

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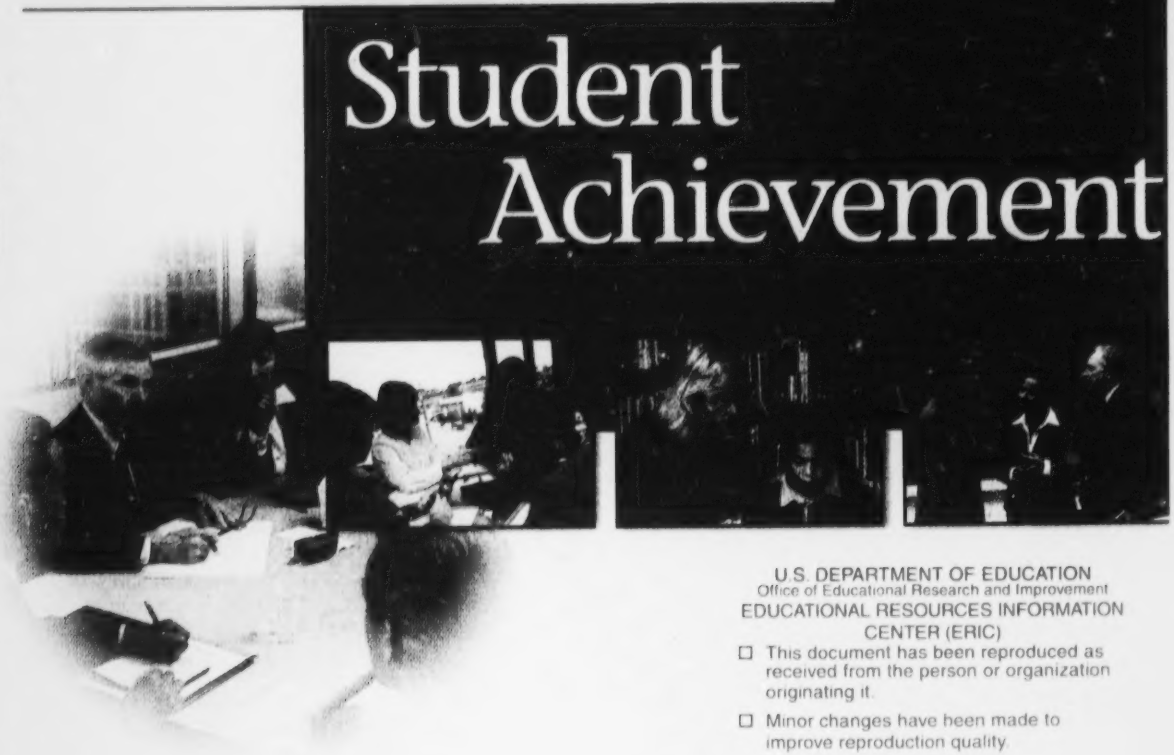

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# TEAM LEADERSHIP FOR STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

## *The Roles of the School Board and the Superintendent*

Ellen Henderson
Jeannie Henry
Judith Brody Saks
Anne Wright

A Joint Publication of the
National School Boards Association and the
American Association of School Administrators

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# FOREWORD

Changing times are bringing new pressures and challenges to superintendents and school board members. Where school leaders used to be able to count on nearly unquestioning support from the community, confrontation and criticism are increasingly common. Where communities themselves used to be united by common language, heritage, and values, they are now increasingly diverse. Where education was once an almost purely local matter, there is now national demand for measurable improvement in student achievement, accountability for test results, competing demands for resources, and exponentially increasing information.

But with challenges come opportunities, and it is to possibilities and potential that *Team Leadership for Student Achievement: The Roles of the School Board and the Superintendent* speaks. Never has it been more critical for school boards and superintendents to work together more effectively toward clearly articulated goals. By collaborating to create a climate of trust and open communication, the board/superintendent leadership team can unite a community around its children.

Local control of local schools is a foundation of our democracy. But every school leadership team operates in a unique context. Some communities have a history and culture of collaboration and support for their schools and will recognize themselves in the stories and themes of this book. Others are still in search of that formula and can use these key ideas as a starting point for healing.

Whatever the context, creating a strong board-superintendent team is a long journey; this book is a valuable first step. We look forward to supporting local superintendents and school boards as they make that journey together on behalf of America's children.

*Anne L. Bryant, Executive Director*
*National School Boards Association*

*Paul Houston, Executive Director*
*American Association of School Administrators*

# PREFACE

In 1999, the National School Boards Association (NSBA) developed a framework of eight "key" areas of focus for school board members in their work of governance for student achievement. These key areas focus a board's attention on governance activities essential for developing and sustaining a high-quality school system.

Leadership staff at the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) reviewed the Key Work framework and agreed that the eight areas of focus are essential for quality school system leadership. The two organizations also agreed that superintendents and school board members share responsibilities in each of the key areas.

In January 2000, AASA and NSBA brought together a large work group of highly respected and well-experienced board members and superintendents to discuss, define, and differentiate the responsibilities of their respective members. This collaborative analysis and differentiation of responsibilities led to an intense and productive discussion regarding the relationship between the board and the superintendent. It also confirmed the belief of the two organizations that team leadership for student achievement is necessary at this turn of the millennium if public schools are to meet the challenges facing them across America, challenges that threaten their very existence.

This joint publication addresses the roles both of board members and of superintendents in each of the Key Work areas. It also provides profiles of school districts where the board and the superintendent have developed a successful, productive leadership team for student achievement. The primary purpose is to promote thoughtful dialogue among all members of a school district's leadership team as well as to present models that demonstrate what a successful team can accomplish. This ongoing dialogue should help build mutual understanding and productive collaboration between the superintendent and board members so that the team as a whole can focus on its primary mission—providing leadership for high levels of student achievement. The school district staff, the students, the parents, and the community depend on quality leadership in order for America's public schools to survive and to be effective.

*Ellen Henderson, Jeannie Henry,*
*Judith Brody Saks, and Anne Wright*
*Alexandria, Virginia, September 2001*

# INTRODUCTION

In the past, school boards often have not sought nor been encouraged to play an active role in the various facets of student achievement. Usually both boards and superintendents felt more comfortable leaving instructionally related matters solely in the hands of the professional staff.

Although the board must rely on the professional staff to carry out the district's curriculum and instructional goals, the board, as the governing body, has a responsibility to create the vision and direction, to set policy, to provide resources, and then to monitor regularly the results of student achievement initiatives. The public sees the board as its representative and expects the board to make wise choices focused on helping all students achieve at higher levels.

The board and the superintendent must work together as a leadership team for the district, modeling to staff and community a shared commitment to higher standards, an ability to discuss difficult topics professionally, and the belief that continuous improvement is necessary if all students are to succeed. This leadership team must insist on a culture of high expectations for all children that starts in every classroom and moves upward through the system to the boardroom.

NSBA's "Key Work of School Boards" offers a framework for systems thinking and action for school system governance to address student achievement as a top priority issue. Although the board and superintendent must work as a team to be effective, each plays a different role on that team. As the leadership team, the board and superintendent must create a system-wide approach to improving student achievement, recognizing the board's appropriate role as the community's representative and the superintendent's appropriate role as the professionally trained educator.

Chapter 1 of this book presents an overview of general guidelines for role differentiation, a brief description of the Key Work dimensions, and a short glossary of educational terms relating to student achievement. Chapters 2 through 9 provide a close-up look at the roles of the board and superintendent in relation to each of the Key Work elements. Chapters 10 through 21 present profiles of board-superintendent teams making a positive difference in the quality of education in their districts.

These profiles tell stories of leadership and communication, of hard work and teamwork—all with a focus on the core mission of the public schools: educating America's children. These superintendents and board members have found ways to

put aside their personal needs, and sometimes their previous bad habits, in order to develop a relationship of shared responsibility with clearly differentiated roles. The profiles are not recipes or road maps, but they are illuminations of what is possible. Each school district has its own dynamics and issues to be resolved, and every person who chooses to assume a leadership position as a board member or a superintendent has both the opportunity and the responsibility to work as part of a team to create a successful school district.

## USING THIS BOOK

This publication is intended to serve as a stimulus for dialogue, an inspiration for building relationships, and a framework for mutually developed teamwork. It is not a code of rules to be followed point by point, thereby further compartmentalizing boards and superintendents into static roles and fixed relationships. Rather, it is based on a systems approach to addressing issues and making decisions through ongoing dialogue and reflection as needs and circumstances change.

As a board member or a superintendent, you can use this publication as the basis for a vibrant conversation among your colleagues in leadership. Raise issues. Debate roles. Challenge assumptions. Commit yourself to collaborate on developing new ways to deal with problems. Whatever the case, talk openly and often about what you see as necessary in the way your board and superintendent work together. Most important, be willing to listen openly to what others think. Use this publication as a basis for establishing a dialogue that creates genuine shared accountability with clearly delineated responsibility for student success.

PART 1

# KEY ROLES OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

CHAPTER I

# THE BOARD AND THE SUPERINTENDENT

Efforts to improve student achievement generally focus on academic standards, teacher quality, curriculum development, and other important topics. Often overlooked is the board and superintendent relationship and how the board and superintendent can work as a team to foster achievement for all students.

Why is this relationship so critical to student achievement? It is important because student achievement elements such as high academic standards, teacher quality, and an excellent curriculum require leadership. More specifically, in order to thrive district-wide, these and other achievement components require systemic leadership. District-wide leadership is the job of the school board and superintendent, and each has key roles to play if the school system is to flourish. In turn, their leadership and guidance need to be integrated into the work of administrators and school-level leaders. Because of these different levels of leadership and interdependency, there is no magic bullet or simple solution to improving student achievement. In short, as the districts profiled in this publication will illustrate, there is no substitute for a systems approach that includes thoughtful consideration of achievement issues, hard work, and leadership.

## STRUCTURES

Recent discussion and debate have questioned whether the current school board and superintendent structure needs to be changed. Much of the discussion falls into one of two categories—greater centralization or greater decentralization. Advocates of greater centralization would shift more responsibilities to national, state, or regional agencies. Supporters of more decentralization would give school personnel and parents more authority and responsibility, usually through site management.

While the centralization and decentralization debate continues, there is little hard data to support a radical shift of the current structure in either direction. Between the ends of the centralization and decentralization continuum lie many issues. Too much centralization can make members of the public and school personnel feel they have little say in their school's future direction, goals, and objectives. Too much decentralization can result in duplication of effort and lack of consistent approaches to improving student achievement. This does not imply that there are no areas along the continuum that deserve attention. However, it does suggest that attention should be focused on how the participants in this broader structure—state and regional agencies, school boards and superintendents, schools and the public—can complement each other to improve effectiveness and student performance.

Current debates about structure are mentioned in order to provide a context for board and superintendent relations and to convey that the board and super-

intendent are part of a larger system. The concern of this book, however, is more limited—how the board and superintendent can work as a team to improve student achievement.

### TEAMWORK BASICS

Most everyone is familiar with the essential ingredients of teamwork—trust, respect, shared values and knowledge, and each team member's understanding of his or her role. These elements are virtually intuitive and permeate our culture from the workplace to the playing fields. If the board and superintendent are to function as a team, however, they need to go beyond identifying the elements of teamwork. They need to know how to put those elements into practice.

Basic to functioning as a team is a plan for roles and procedures. The districts profiled in this publication and the literature on the subject highlight the importance of specified roles and procedures along with corresponding policies to support them.

The following activities are critical in developing a plan for roles and procedures:

- Outline board and superintendent roles and how they complement one another. Broadly defined, the board establishes policies and the superintendent implements them and is responsible for the operation of the school district. Together they work to engage the community in determining the future direction of district schools and have the joint task of establishing district-wide goals and objectives.
- Emphasize that the board functions as a unit, not as a collection of individuals with individual agendas. The main objective of both school board and superintendent is to educate the district's students. To achieve this objective, they should view themselves as members of a team—not as adversaries on opposing teams.
- Determine whether there will be board committees or whether the board will function as a committee of the whole. If board committees are used, establish a policy that the role of the committee is to report and make recommendations to the entire board.
- Establish how the board meeting agenda will be developed: What roles do the superintendent, board president, and board members play? Will the board use a consent agenda? (That is, will issues on which there is a consensus be placed on the agenda for a public vote?)

- Specify how decisions will be made—by consensus or by majority vote. Consensus-driven decision making can help build relationships and break down barriers to improving student achievement.
- Recognize the superintendent as the chief executive officer of the school district. The role of the chief executive officer includes providing the board with information and making policy, budget, and program recommendations. As CEO the superintendent is responsible for administering policies, resources, personnel, and the educational program. Outside of policy concerns, the board should avoid involvement in school personnel issues—hiring and firing of staff.
- Develop a code of conduct and ethics that addresses how the board and superintendent are to behave while conducting the business of the school district. Among the topics to include in the code are remaining dedicated to student achievement, avoiding conflicts of interest, keeping current on education issues, and following the laws/regulations that govern board and superintendent behavior.
- Institute a policy and procedures to address parent/citizen complaints and inquiries. This does much to maintain the unity of the board—especially unity of voice, or speaking as a board—and gives the superintendent a mechanism to address complaints and inquiries. It keeps a board member or the superintendent from getting caught up in an issue particular to one parent or community group and inadvertently undermining the work of the board and superintendent team. A policy and procedure also reinforces a culture of "no surprises" and facilitates communication.
- Build for the future—seek out high-quality future board and superintendent candidates. Board candidates can be cultivated through outreach efforts to represent the needs of the community and to engage the public in the strategic direction of its schools. Future superintendents can be developed from within the district through a structured professional development program.

Districts use a variety of strategies to bring their roles and procedural plans to life and build trust and respect:

- Communicate, communicate, and communicate to build trust, respect, understanding, and teamwork. Newsletters, e-mails, access to individuals, and mailing packets are used regularly to ensure all players have the information they need to fulfill their roles. Communication strategies should emphasize no surprises—information critical to decision making is shared by boards and superintendents, and access to information is not used as a political tool. "No surprises" also means board members speak as a board, and both the board and superintendent speak in support of the vision and goals of the district.

- Board and superintendent work sessions before board meetings help foster teamwork, encourage communication, and allow participants to engage in deliberations and consensus building. The preliminary work done in these sessions can make board meetings more productive. Use a work-session agenda to keep the group on target. The deliberation encouraged by work sessions often brings forth a variety of ideas. To avoid distraction, yet capture ideas not directly related to the agenda, keep a log of ideas for future sessions.
- Board and superintendent retreats offer opportunities for people to get to know each other and better understand the diversity of skills, personalities, and interests among board members. Retreats provide a more relaxed environment in which to review district goals, objectives, policies, and procedures.
- Opportunities for social interaction among the board, superintendent, and staff can foster team building. These opportunities often take the form of celebrations of achievement, such as progress made on strategic goals and objectives. Opportunities also flourish where there are difficulties. Recognition of problems and the work being undertaken to address them can help build a sense of pride and mutual effort.
- Assign mentors to new board members to build and maintain a culture based on teamwork and to support roles and procedural plans. Mentors can also provide new members with a sense of continuity and enhance understanding of issues that are important to improving student achievement. As one superintendent explained, "The assistance of former board presidents in providing facts and historical perspective is invaluable."
- Hold orientation sessions for new board members. Both the board and superintendent should oversee the content of these sessions to ensure new board members understand their roles and know how to function and how to conduct themselves.
- Professional development can greatly strengthen the board and superintendent team. It can help turn around a conflict situation or keep a well-functioning team on track. Focus on professional development that emphasizes joint board and superintendent training and teamwork. Often development programs offer teamwork models. Since it is unlikely one model can meet every district's needs, do not hesitate to borrow from a variety of models to develop structures that best suit the board and superintendent. Your state school boards association can offer or suggest quality board development opportunities.
- Seek out other board and superintendent teams at conferences and meetings and through professional organizations and share wisdom and best practices. For example, one of the profiled school districts reported an interesting prac-

tice that helped the board and superintendent overcome a history of conflict. With the help of an outside facilitator, they declared amnesty on past difficulties and hurt feelings and committed to "a worthy and appropriate focus on improving student achievement."

- Engage in board and superintendent evaluation. Whether evaluations are conducted separately or jointly, the districts profiled in this publication view the superintendent's and board's performances as interrelated. The vice-chairman of one board summarized this perspective when he described how the board approached the evaluation of the superintendent: "There is no way that seven members can assess and discuss the performance of one team member without reflecting on the performance of the whole team." Evaluations that capture and illustrate key role and procedural plan elements and that examine how the board and superintendent work together are the most insightful.

### BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE TEAM

Building a teamwork foundation is only the first step to developing a systemic approach to student achievement and fulfilling the respective roles of the board and superintendent. As mentioned previously, the board establishes policies and the superintendent implements them and is responsible for the operation of the school district. Together, they work to engage the community in the future direction of district schools and have the joint task of establishing district-wide goals and objectives. The obvious question is, How do they accomplish this in a systemic and effective manner? Other questions follow: What policies are necessary, how should they be implemented, and how do the board and superintendent maintain a focus on student achievement? What does engaging the community in the future direction of district schools mean, and how are overarching goals and objective to be determined?

The answer to these questions is found in the common thread that runs through all the districts profiled in this the second part of this book and in the literature on effective boards and superintendents. That common thread is strategic planning.

Strategic planning means developing a thoughtful, sequenced set of strategies to accomplish pre-established goals. Rural, suburban, and urban districts all can engage in strategic planning and build their capacity to do it well through training and alliances with other organizations—professional associations, colleges, and universities.

A strategic planning model helps to define and focus the planning process, and careful consideration should go into the selection of a model. Keeping within the

parameters of any state or local requirements, key selection criteria include the following:

1. What structured guidance does the model offer on engaging communities in establishing the district's vision and overarching goals and objectives?
2. Is there a framework for focusing on and integrating student achievement issues, such as standards, curriculum development, teacher quality, and professional development?
3. Does the model use budget analysis to align resources with goals and objectives?
4. Does it incorporate processes for research-based and data-based decision making?
5. What structures and strategies does the model suggest for integrating school improvement planning into the strategic planning process?
6. Are the roles of the board, superintendent, and other participants in the planning process defined and strategies suggested for keeping everyone on task?
7. How is progress on goals and objectives reviewed and measured? Is there an emphasis on continuous improvement?
8. How adaptable is the planning model to the size and needs of the district?

The objective here, however, is not an in-depth discussion of strategic planning and student achievement. It is to look at how strategic planning contributes to building an effective board and superintendent team.

***Roles.*** Strategic planning that models board and superintendent roles is an effective team-building tool. It should help the board focus on the district vision, corresponding goals and objectives, and oversight, so the superintendent can concentrate on implementation or means. These roles mirror those discussed previously and can be carried throughout all the work of the board and superintendent team. In its simplest form, a model may describe board and superintendent roles within two circles. The circles may overlap to illustrate how their respective roles complement one another and to address issues that do not clearly fall within one circle or another.

In one district, the board and superintendent agreed to call areas where overlap might occur the "gray zone." At a meeting attended by many parents who were upset about a particular issue, the board tried to address the parents' concerns on the spot. The superintendent let the board know that "we are probably operating in the gray zone on this item." Understanding what the superintendent meant, the board moved to have him investigate the issue and report back with recommendations. He did, and the issue was readily resolved. The superintendent describes the incident as a "great example of role definition and how to keep it

clear.... No one in the room except the board members had any idea of what the 'gray zone' reference meant."

***Community and Decision Making.*** Engaging the public in a strategic vision, goals, and objectives can do much to focus and unite the board and superintendent team. Again, there are models for doing this, such as those offered in the NSBA publications *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement* and *Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Public Engagement.* The emphasis here is not on specific models, but on the benefits of building unity of purpose. By engaging the public in the strategic planning process and focusing on student achievement, the board and superintendent can create a vision and establish goals and objectives that have a broad base of consensus. The result should be a strategic plan that has community support and a board and superintendent that avoid getting bogged down in divisive individual or single-interest-group agendas. While there may be differences of opinion, the planning and engagement processes and models provide mechanisms to address them so that decisions are made on an informed rather than an emotional or personal basis.

The following wisdom was shared by a board president from a district where board members are elected from subdistricts: "If a board is trying to accomplish something about which most or all members cannot agree, they need to rethink their project or objectives. A key to the successful resolution of an issue is talking it through, having sufficient information for a rational decision, remaining calm, and not being afraid to ask the administration to go back and readdress the issue. There must be a strong focus on the overall school district itself and not on individual single-member districts or only special-interest groups."

***Focus and Continuity.*** Focus and continuity are primary objectives of strategic planning. A strategic-planning process that encompasses a framework for integrating student achievement into its visioning and goal-setting processes requires the board and superintendent team to concentrate on issues critical to student achievement. Strategic planning fosters continuity by helping boards and superintendents build on their work and the work of those who came before them. A carefully developed plan guides the board and superintendent team and is their legacy to future team members. It can help shorten the learning curve and increase the effectiveness of strategic plans and implementation strategies.

Continuity does not mean doing things as they have always been done. What it does imply is a willingness to give plans and strategies time to succeed and to make changes and corrections as needed. As the superintendent from a district that uses a strategic, integrated management system to continually improve the school system's processes and operations explained, "Our improvement model

provides the ability to make regular adjustments as we move forward." A school board in another district summarized the issue of continuity in the following manner: "Stability is important if we mean 'a consistency of purpose,' but if it means 'a resistance to change' it is not important. New members bring another point of view, a new way of looking at issues. If this new view is positive in nature, it can expand the board's vision for the school district."

Many of the strategies described previously to reinforce role and procedural plans can easily be adapted to address strategic planning. For example, retreats can incorporate review and discussion of strategic goals and objectives, and strategic planning criteria can be developed for board and superintendent evaluations that include communications, community engagement, and related activities. In addition, the board and superintendent can seek training, examine best practices, and share wisdom with other districts.

**LEADERSHIP**

Metaphorically, if strategic planning is the head of the team, then leadership is its heart. The leadership of the board and superintendent, within their respective roles, can bring strategic plans to life, enhance the focus and motivation of the administration and staff, and provide an emphasis on student achievement.

Often when we think of leadership, the term *charisma* or the image of a legendary hero comes to mind, so it is important to demystify the concept of leadership by looking at its three major components and recognizing that it is within our grasp.

1. ***Vision.*** In strategic planning, vision is a source from which strategic goals and objectives are derived. It is in the synthesis and formulation of a student achievement vision that leadership comes into play. Together, the board and superintendent have the task of creating a district student achievement vision out of the results of their community-engagement efforts, data, forecasts, and alternatives they are presented with. To do this, the team members must call not only upon planning processes and models, but also upon their own expertise, insights, and instincts. Leadership is not just responding to pubic opinion or data; it is analyzing and interpreting it and bringing past experiences and acquired knowledge to bear. Applying leadership to information is illustrated by a profiled district where the board and superintendent team looks at a variety of data but uses common sense and experience to understand it. The superintendent notes, "It is important in using data to remember that statistics represent people—students, their environments, teachers, and the thoughts, mind-sets, emotions, and individual goals may or may not always be reflected in data." The role of the board and

superintendent team is to articulate people's hopes for the district into a vision of what and how students are to learn.

2. ***Beliefs and Communication.*** Leaders believe in the district's vision. The board and superintendent team that believes students can succeed, that students and learning come first, and that the contributions of staff members are critical to the success of schools, will be more effective than a team that articulates these ideas in its vision but does not truly believe them. Leaders also communicate their beliefs. The effectiveness of communication is enhanced if beliefs are expressed in terms that connect with the aspirations of others and the message is concise and consistent. For these reasons, leaders are often storytellers. Communication also means listening. Listening not only adds to the perception and understanding of leaders, it is a highly effective way of communicating to others that they have value. Why trust or believe in someone who will not listen and appears not to care? Over and over again, the districts profiled in this publication highlight the importance of beliefs and communication to good board and superintendent relations and to the effectiveness of the board and superintendent team.

3. ***Leading by Example.*** Authority to lead does not come exclusively from a position of authority. Leaders who do not have some degree of authenticity may soon find their effectiveness undermined. Authenticity can include a variety of traits—honesty, integrity, the ability to stand up to controversy, and the ability to serve as a role model to others. The inclusiveness of the list of traits is not as important as the implications of authenticity. Authenticity implies leading by example. A board and superintendent team that promotes continual learning for staff should apply the same standards to themselves. To further illustrate, a district that had determined to improve student achievement voted unanimously to hire a superintendent who had helped turn around another district with similar problems. As the superintendent explained, "The school board's commitment to change was most exemplified by its willingness to risk hiring the district's first African-American superintendent in more than 100 years.... The action sent a strong message to the community. On a personal level, it was a very strong message to me. Their expectations of me were very high, and my expectations of myself were even higher."

This list is not meant to be exhaustive but to outline the major components of leadership. It invokes many of the elements that were described in the Teamwork Basics section. The two lists can and should be combined to describe effective teams and leaders. This section was also included to remind us that leadership is not only about intellectual activities. Leadership is an intensely human activity, closely linked to people's expectations and hopes.

The public has every right to have high expectations for its schools and to hold the school board and superintendent accountable for student achievement. However, the public should realize that there are no quick fixes and should ask to see proof of systemic efforts to improve performance. It is the job of the board and superintendent team to identify systemic and strategic solutions to problems and build support for those solutions within the community and school system.

The twelve districts profiled in the second part of this publication confirm the importance and effectiveness of teamwork, strategic planning, and leadership. Their stories are rich with examples of specific strategies, models, and wisdom that can help other boards and superintendents strengthen their relationship and improve student achievement. Most importantly, their stories tell us there is no wizard, just the head and heart to get the job done.

The twelve districts are: Beaumont Independent School District, Beaumont, Texas; Daviess County Public Schools, Owensboro, Kentucky; Dyersburg City School System, Dyersburg, Tennessee; Fort Wayne Community Schools, Fort Wayne, Indiana; Fort Worth Independent School District, Fort Worth, Texas; Kennewick School District, Kennewick, Washington; Minneapolis Public Schools, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Monroe Township Public Schools, Williamstown, New Jersey; Newport News Public Schools, Newport News, Virginia; Omaha Public Schools, Omaha, Nebraska; Pasco County Schools, Land O'Lakes, Florida; and Sitka School District, Sitka, Alaska.

### THE KEY WORK OF SCHOOL LEADERS

The strategic planning and leadership elements discussed above in many ways are reflected in the National School Boards Association's Key Work of School Boards. Keeping in mind the respective roles of the board and superintendent, the Key Work of School Boards can easily be expanded to the key work of the board and superintendent team.

The eight key areas that guide the leadership team in focusing on higher student achievement are the following:

- **Vision**—the ultimate goal that student achievement is the top priority not only in the school district but also in the community.
- **Standards**—what students are expected to know and be able to do at critical points in their school careers. Some districts set their own standards; some districts operate with only state standards.
- **Assessment**—ongoing measures to gauge student progress toward standards.
- **Accountability**—examining, reporting, and analyzing responsibility for progress toward standards.

- **Alignment**—coordinating all resources to ensure student achievement.
- **Climate**—the quality of relationships and attitudes among staff, students, and parents regarding the operation of the school and its programs.
- **Collaboration**—building support with all stakeholders, with special emphasis on business and political leaders in the community, so that high levels of student achievement are commonly understood and become a community-wide priority.
- **Continuous improvement**—using data to assess progress toward standards and to make necessary changes in the instructional program and school operations to help students meet standards.

### THE BOARD'S ROLE: AN OVERVIEW

The board that is focused on raising student achievement concentrates principally on the following actions:

- Embracing both privately and publicly a united **belief** that all children can learn and achieve at higher levels.
- Ensuring **involvement** of a broad base of stakeholders in creating the vision for the community's schools and supporting the vision both publicly and through board decisions.
- Committing to **training** so that all board members have a better understanding of both the importance and the operations of the eight key areas critical to improving student achievement.
- Approving **comprehensive plans** developed with the superintendent's leadership to move the students in the district to higher achievement levels.
- Adopting **policies** needed to support improvement initiatives.
- Allocating **funding** for and **alignment** of the resources needed to advance student achievement. These resources include, but are not limited to, school facilities, technology, staffing, staff development, instructional materials, and assessment instruments.
- **Monitoring** progress toward district goals and supporting the superintendent in efforts to make changes.
- Ensuring clear, concise, and user friendly **communications** about all facets of the district's emphasis on higher student achievement.
- Serving as the advocate for building **community support** for student achievement as a priority with a variety of groups, including public officials, parents, media, and business and community leaders.

As lay people, board members rely on the superintendent to present information on student achievement and its complexities in language that is understandable to them and to the public. The superintendent's information is crucial in building

trust among the leadership team and with the community—a trust that is necessary to make progress for all students.

A good school board does not run the district; rather, it ensures that the district is run well.

### THE SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE: AN OVERVIEW

The superintendent, as the chief executive officer, assumes responsibilities that are much more specific than those of the board. The superintendent's professional training and experience are prerequisites for leading and ensuring effective management of the school district, often the biggest employer with the largest budget in a community.

The superintendent, as part of the team, is expected to direct the following areas of responsibility:

- **Leading** strategic planning initiatives, collaborative efforts with the community, change initiatives, and training for the board on various aspects of improving student achievement.
- **Modeling,** through words and actions, support for district initiatives related to raising student achievement and expecting the same behavior from staff and board.
- **Implementing** board decisions, such as those related to policies, budget, communications, and personnel.
- **Developing** plans in all areas related to student achievement, including budget, staffing, alignment of resources, assessment, staff development, and communication.
- **Informing** the board, staff, and community of recommendations, action, progress, adjustments, and challenges related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, standards, and other components of student achievement.
- **Recommending** actions to the board based on best practices, data, staff and community input, board policy, available resources, and compliance with current law.
- **Monitoring** and evaluating the effectiveness of programs, staff, budget, standards, policy, communications, and other appropriate areas.
- **Advocating** to all stakeholders the importance of student achievement as the community's number one priority.
- **Ensuring** that change initiatives on raising student achievement are occurring at all levels throughout the district.
- **Analyzing** the need for new initiatives and changes to existing initiatives based on data from program evaluations and student assessments.

## STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT TERMINOLOGY

**Alignment:** A process to ensure that all district resources are prioritized and allocated according to student achievement goals. The following are some examples of these resources: curriculum, staffing, staff development, instructional materials/textbooks, technology, and supplemental services.

**Alternative assessments:** Any form of measuring what students know and are able to do other than traditional standardized tests. These may include portfolios, teacher judgments, performance-based tests, and teacher-made tests.

**Assessment system:** A planned approach to evaluating student learning that determines how well students are achieving and how they are progressing.

**Benchmarks:** Performance standards based either on best practices or measurable progress in specific areas. Also may be known as *performance indicators.*

**Curriculum:** Content taught in each grade level and each subject area.

**Data:** Quantitative information obtained from a variety of sources, such as standardized tests, that allows comparisons based on demographic factors.

**Disaggregated data:** Data broken out by specific groups within the total student population, such as by race, gender, number of college-prep courses taken, and family income level.

**Criterion-referenced tests:** Tests designed to determine whether students have acquired predefined knowledge or mastered specified skills. The focus is on what the student knows and can do. Criterion-referenced assessments measure how well students perform in relation to established criteria for learning, rather than how students compare to each other.

**Norm-referenced tests:** Tests designed to compare student performance to a representative sample of students known as the norm group. The focus is on comparing a student's score to the performance of other students at the national, state, or local level.

**Performance-based assessments:** Assessments that require students to perform hands-on tasks such as writing essays or conducting science experiments. These assessments can measure individual performance or performance in a group.

**Stakeholders:** Individuals or groups with something to gain or lose from the public school system. Stakeholders include students, parents, the school board, administration, staff members, businesses, community members, legislators, and others.

**Standards:** Subject-matter benchmarks of what students should know and be able to do. Standards establish the criteria for students' academic achievement and drive what students learn in the classroom.

**Standards-based instruction:** Teaching and curriculum directed toward clearly defined standards in each subject and grade level.

**Strategic plan:** A proactive approach to identify organizational challenges and develop short-term and long-term solutions.

CHAPTER II

# VISION

**QUIZ:**

***How should your leadership team establish a vision for student achievement in your district?***

**a.** Your superintendent meets with the administrative staff to develop a district-wide plan.
**b.** Your board tells the superintendent its expectation for student achievement.
**c.** Your leadership team, staff, parents, students, and others representative of the diversity of your community work together in a structured planning process.

Answer: c

Developing a shared vision for student achievement that reflects the common values and core beliefs of a school district is the starting point for the leadership team that wants to focus on student achievement.

This shared vision, or strategic plan, serves as the foundation for the mission and goals that not only direct the leadership team's actions but also solidify the commitment of the entire community to improving achievement for all students. Getting the entire community involved in creating the vision can help generate support for the resources necessary to make the plan a reality.

Vision is not about where schools are but about where the stakeholders want them to be. A positive vision is strategic and future focused, designed to shape events rather than simply let them happen. Strategic planning is not about compliance; strategic planning is about changing the way a school system does business.

Much has been written about the need for visionary leaders—leaders who are willing to take risks and who inspire others to accomplish goals initially thought beyond their reach. Public education needs visionary leaders who can articulate academic goals and motivate the community to work together to make sure all children learn at higher levels.

Vision, beliefs or values, mission, purpose, and goals are all components that convey the shared core beliefs of the organization regardless of the strategic planning approached used.

John F. Kennedy's vision was simple: put a man on the moon by the end of the decade. His vision captured the imagination of the American people and spawned an era of space exploration that was unthinkable 30 years earlier except as science fiction.

Without a broad base of involvement from all segments of staff and community, the leadership team is unlikely to energize the commitment and the passion of those who must work to achieve the vision.

Closely related to vision is mission. In effective organizations, the mission statement—short, succinct and memorable—captures and reflects the core values and beliefs that guide the organization. A vision with anything less than student achievement as the top priority cannot fulfill the original mission of public education.

The strategic plan that implements the vision cannot sit on a shelf. Moving the vision from paper into practice is the real challenge. The vision comes to life in the day-to-day actions of everyone in the organization. In a school district, "everyone" includes the employees and the other stakeholders, such as students, parents, community leaders, businesses, and governmental agencies.

Engaging the total community makes it more likely the vision will be achieved. As the leadership team, the board and superintendent are responsible for working with the staff and community to establish student achievement as the top priority and then providing the necessary financial and human resources. The team also should monitor the progress of the plan, making adjustments as needed and periodically reviewing the entire plan.

Communication of the vision to the entire community is essential. The leadership team must articulate clearly the key points of its vision. Team members should repeat these key points at every opportunity when they are together and when they are out in the community. By constantly repeating and embracing these key components, the leadership team shares and sustains its vision.

## Key Action

Establish a vision for student achievement shared by the school board, superintendent, staff, and community.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Approves a strategic planning process to include stakeholders in creating the vision for student achievement. | • Recommends a visionary strategic planning process to the board that incorporates participation by a broad base of stakeholders.<br>• Ensures the integrity of the planning process.<br>• Ensures staff development to carry out the planning process.<br>• Ensures that the recommendations of the strategic planning team are presented to the board for action.<br>• Coordinates periodic and annual review of the strategic plan. |
| • Adopts the strategic plan. | • Ensures that short- and long-range plans related to the vision are developed and carried out both at the district and at the school level.<br>• Develops performance indicators based on data to measure continuous progress toward vision for student achievement.<br>• Conducts work sessions with the board to increase its understanding of progress needed to move from *status quo* to the vision for student achievement.<br>• Recommends performance indicators for board action. |
| • Adopts board goals that support the strategic plan. | • Works with the board to identify its role in supporting the strategic plan.<br>• Works with the board to develop plans for carrying out its goals. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Communicates the strategic plan. | • Communicates, through the district's communication plan, the vision to the staff and community in a team approach that incorporates board participation.<br>• Prepares and disseminates information about progress toward the vision. |
| • Keeps vision at the forefront of all decision making. | • Uses the strategic plan to guide priority recommendations to the board.<br>• Uses the strategic plan to guide decisions throughout the organization. |
| • Initiates and adopts policies needed to support the strategic plan. | • Recommends policies needed to support the strategic plan.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to identify additional policies or revise existing ones. |
| • Allocates resources based on the strategic plan. | • Recommends resources needed to support the strategic plan through the budgeting process.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to identify resources and funding needed. |
| • Monitors progress toward vision periodically. | • Brings data to the board periodically that enables it to review progress in student achievement.<br>• Recommends changes based on data and on stakeholder input. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

A school district should have the following policies established by the board and implemented by the superintendent to support a high quality vision:

- AD Educational philosophy/district mission
- ADA School district goals and objectives
- AE Accountability/commitment to accomplishment

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

CHAPTER III

# STANDARDS

**QUIZ:**

***Why are standards important for raising student achievement in your district?***

**a.** Your teachers know what to teach in each subject and at each grade level.
**b.** Your parents and community know the district's expectations for student learning.
**c.** Your district focuses its resources on priority areas.

Answers: a, b, c.

Establishing specific and clearly defined student learning standards presents a unique and critical challenge for leadership teams.

In "Hot Topics: Standards," published July 10, 2001, *Education Week* notes the following three types of standards:

***Academic standards***, which describe what students should know and be able to do in the core academic subjects at each grade level.

***Content standards***, which describe basic agreement about the body of education knowledge that all students should know.

***Performance standards***, which describe what level of performance is good enough for students to be described as advanced, proficient, below basic, or by some other performance level.

Standards form the foundation for a school district's learning system. Standards help teachers and principals set priorities for the use of instructional time and resources. Standards provide a measure for identifying students who need extra or different instructional support in order to succeed. Moreover, standards establish consistent expectations so that all children are challenged with quality education.

Some states have established content and performance standards that apply to all public school students. The leadership team must know what these standards are and how they affect local decisions. Also, states are implementing new graduation requirements with high-stakes exit examinations. The superintendent is responsible for helping board members understand what these tests require, how they are linked to state-established performance standards, and what they mean for students who do not perform satisfactorily.

If state standards are already in place, these should be incorporated into district-level standards to ensure consistency and compliance. Otherwise, confusion will exist among staff members, making it more difficult to establish accountability.

Many school districts establish quality performance standards known as benchmarks. Benchmarking may involve finding *best practices* for a particular standard

and adapting them to the district. Another approach is to adopt performance standards that set steady, measurable progress over time in specific areas. An example might be, "The percent of students scoring 'ready' will increase in grade four by *X* percent each year."

Establishing standards is one of the leadership team's most important responsibilities. Once standards are in place, the superintendent, working with principals, teachers, and others, develops the curricula, and then identifies and promotes use of instructional strategies that enable students to meet the new standards. Professional development, communications, and an evaluation process are essential if the standards are to be accepted by the staff and the community and implemented in the classroom.

The leadership team must insist on educational excellence for all students. In schools and districts that serve a large number of needy students and where community expectations for student performance are not high, there is frequently a tendency to set minimal standards. As a result, many students are not challenged to achieve the academic rigor needed to succeed in the competitive world.

The leadership team must describe student performance standards so that parents, students, community, and staff will understand the expectations. Most importantly, students need to know exactly what is required of them.

The leadership team cannot establish a successful standards-based educational system without the support of all critical stakeholders.

- If teachers do not embrace the concept of standards, they will not prepare their students to meet them.
- If parents do not understand and support the standards, they cannot help their children meet expectations.
- If the community does not support the standards, it will not provide the resources necessary for schools to prepare students to meet them.

Standards set consistent levels of performance expectations for all students and form the foundation of quality educational programs.

## Key Action

Set clear learning standards for student achievement.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Approves standards for student learning. | • Recommends standards for student learning based on state standards. If no state standards exist, presents standards recommended by a credible external source or presents standards developed locally with input from key stakeholders.<br>• Leads discussion with the board on state standards and alignment where local standards also exist.<br>• Leads discussion with the board on whether a commitment exists to exceed state standards.<br>• Recommends changes in standards to the board as needed. |
| • Ensures that curriculum, instruction, learning environment, and assessment are aligned with student achievement standards. | • Implements alignment of curriculum, instruction, learning environment, and assessment with student achievement standards.<br>• Makes staffing and resource allocation decisions based on student achievement standards.<br>• Ensures professional development so that teachers incorporate student achievement standards into classroom instruction. |
| • Initiates, adopts, and revises policies to support standards. | • Recommends policies needed to support standards.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to identify additional policies or revise existing ones. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Participates in periodic work sessions to review student standards and the district's initiatives to help all students achieve. | • Provides the board with background and updates on district standards.<br>• Provides board with data that analyzes the district's efforts to have all students meet standards.<br>• Discusses and recommends changes to help students who are not meeting standards. |
| • Ensures clear, jargon-free communications about standards that increase the awareness and understanding of parents, students, staff, and community. | • Develops a comprehensive communication plan for standards that addresses information needs of parents, staff, students, and community.<br>• Prepares easy-to-understand materials targeted for various audiences.<br>• Develops talking points about standards to guide board members and staff in presenting and discussing standards to various audiences. |
| • Encourages community support for standards. | • Develops materials specifically to help board members serve as advocates for standards within the community.<br>• Develops materials specifically to help schools and district staff serve as advocates for standards within the community.<br>• Advocates support for standards publicly and privately. |
| • Provides resources needed to increase the number of students meeting and exceeding standards. | • Makes recommendations for budget, allocation of resources, professional development, and additional instructional materials and equipment based on data related to needs of students. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures that instructional programs are evaluated for effectiveness in helping students meet standards. | • Sets benchmarks and performance indicators for progress over time.<br>• Collects data on progress toward benchmarks and performance indicators and reviews periodically with board and with staff.<br>• Evaluates instructional programs periodically for effectiveness in helping students meet standards.<br>• Recommends additions or deletions to instructional programs based on periodic evaluations and implements approved changes. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

A school district should have the following policies established by the board and implemented by the superintendent to support standards:

- AEA Standards-based education
- IA Instructional goals and learning objectives
- IK Academic achievement

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

CHAPTER IV

# ASSESSMENT

**QUIZ:**

***Why are assessment measures important?***

**a.** They provide data on individual progress towards standards and instruction.
**b.** They identify teachers who need to be dismissed.
**c.** They enable teachers to deliver individualized instruction more effectively.

Answers: a and c

Promoting outstanding student performance based on clearly defined state and local standards is central to the key work of the leadership team. The next step is assessment, determining how well students are meeting those standards.

Good assessments accurately measure and report student performance and progress. Without assessment information, the leadership team may make decisions that are based on conventional wisdom, hunches, and what worked in the past. Having accurate school and student assessment information enables the leadership team to establish and monitor a plan for continuous improvement.

In education, assessment takes many forms and occurs at the classroom, school, district, state, and national levels. The most common assessment is found in classrooms in the form of teacher-made tests. Some school districts also have developed diagnostic programs that enable them to assess student progress toward meeting district standards periodically throughout the year.

When teachers have access to reliable data about how students are doing, they are able to make instructional decisions much more effectively and quickly.

Many states have implemented statewide testing programs. These programs usually rely on annual achievement tests to measure progress toward statewide learning standards.

No one test exists that provides all the information needed to measure student achievement or school quality. Some tests measure knowledge only; others measure skills. Some tests require only basic understanding or skills; others demand higher-order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis. The challenge for the leadership team is to find the right assessments for measuring student achievement in its district.

The purpose of the well-designed assessment program is to determine whether or not the district's standards are being taught and learned. The school district's testing program may not be aligned with the curriculum.

The leadership team also needs to review the state's testing requirements. If the state's standards and testing are not incorporated properly, the district's results may suffer in comparison to those of districts that follow state guidelines.

State-mandated testing does not have to be the only measure of student progress, however—especially if the district's standards exceed those of the state. The leadership team should make sure that the district's testing program complements those of the state.

Testing programs often seem confusing to the average parent or community member. The leadership team should build understanding of these three basic types of tests.

- ***Norm-referenced tests,*** which compare each student to the "norm"; that is, the "average" score of a large sample of test-takers
- ***Criterion-referenced tests,*** which compare each student to a well defined standard of performance
- ***Performance-based tests,*** which require each student to demonstrate what he or she can do

To actually improve student performance requires a concerted effort by the leadership team. Using assessment data that gives quality feedback and making changes based on the feedback and data are essential steps. Such actions are the beginning of accountability, and a good beginning starts with a quality assessment system.

**KEY ACTION:**
Establish an assessment system that periodically measures individual student progress toward standards.

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Participates in training to increase understanding of the elements of assessment:<br>– Concepts<br>– Differences in types of tests<br>– National and state assessments<br>– Relationship of assessment to standards | • Holds work sessions with the board explaining all elements of a comprehensive assessment system. |
| • Approves and ensures periodic expert reviews and revisions of the assessment system for all students. | • Recommends to the board an assessment system that includes alternative assessments related to/aligned with standards and vision.<br>• Uses assessment measures to recommend modifications or changes in curriculum and instruction.<br>• Incorporates appropriate assessment measures as part of staff evaluations.<br>• Conducts periodic review of the assessment system with the board and recommends changes. |
| • Ensures staff development on assessment measures. | • Ensures staff development on the district's assessment measures, including use of data and analysis of individual student performance to help determine student progress and needs.<br>• Ensures staff development on assessment measures using school and grade-level data. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures effective, user-friendly communications on assessment measures and progress. | • Builds understanding, through the district's communications plan, for assessment measures and how they are used to improve instruction. |
| • Provides funding to support assessment system. | • Presents budget recommendations to the board on resources needed to implement and evaluate assessment measures. |
| • Initiates, approves, and monitors policies to ensure a strong assessment system. | • Recommends to the board policies to support the district's assessment system.<br>• Recommends additions or changes as needed. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

A school district should have the following policies established by the board and implemented by the superintendent to support a high quality assessment program:

- IKA Grading and assessment systems
- IKAB Report cards and progress reports
- IKACA Parent conferences
- IKF Graduation requirements
- ILA Test/assessment selection
- ILAB Test assessment/administration
- ILBB State program assessments
- ILC Use and dissemination of assessment results

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CHAPTER V

# ACCOUNTABILITY

**QUIZ:**

***Which of these components should be included in your district's accountability process?***

**a.** Measurable criteria
**b.** Evaluation of superintendent and staff
**c.** Communications plan
**d.** Professional development

Answers: a, b, c, and d

Accountability is one of the most frequently heard words in public education today, but accountability is not unique to schools. Businesses measure accountability by the bottom line, manufacturing by production quality and quantity, and the public sector by how well services are provided. In education, accountability is measured by how well students achieve.

For the leadership team, accountability means assuming responsibility for student results and answering both for the team's actions and for the results of its actions.

In the last 20 years, increasingly rigorous graduation requirements and student learning standards have turned the accountability spotlight on the leadership team. The team must ensure a system-wide culture in which excellent teaching and successful learning can take place. This means reporting to state authorities and to the community how students are doing, what actions are addressing perceived deficiencies, and how compliance with state requirements is ensured.

An accountability process that improves student achievement includes these components.

- Individual student results are measured and shared with staff and parents.
- School and district data are reported in easy to understand formats.
- Student data are analyzed for growth and improvement.
- Staff evaluations include student performance results.
- Student performance results drive district and school decision making.

The leadership team keeps its priorities in focus by constantly asking, "How will this decision improve student performance?" It analyzes data to monitor the effectiveness of decisions and recognizes staff and student success. Decision making no longer relies on politics and perceptions but on facts and focus.

An effective leadership team takes accountability very seriously and serves as responsible stewards. It responds to the critics of public education with solid performance results while taking steps to correct problem areas.

## Key Action

Establish a strong accountability process for the district.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Establishes an accountability process with measurable criteria and ensures an annual review. | • Recommends an accountability process to the board based on the district's strategic plan, standards, and other important factors.<br>• Leads an annual review of the accountability process and recommends changes based on student performance.<br>• Ensures that data and accountability measures are used at the district, school, and classroom levels to set instructional priorities.<br>• Ensures that staff evaluations are linked to accountability measures.<br>• Requires professional development on the accountability process. |
| • Participates in work sessions to understand accountability measures, including data analysis and how the board, administration, and staff should use this information. | • Plans periodic training for the board on accountability measures, including the use and application of data.<br>– Ensures staff training in use of data and other accountability measures. |
| • Adopts an annual superintendent performance plan and ensures that the superintendent's evaluation includes accountability measures. | • Works with the board to develop an annual superintendent performance plan and to identify accountability measures to be used in the superintendent's evaluation. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Recognizes and rewards teachers, educational teams, and schools that consistently produce greater than average student improvement gains. | • Identifies a program to recognize teachers, educational teams, and schools that consistently produce greater than average gains.<br>• Carries out recognition program. |
| • Supports the superintendent's recommendation for dismissal when it is warranted. | • Develops a process to identify teachers whose students consistently fail to make expected gains.<br>– Makes the board aware of district assistance available to these teachers.<br>– Monitors teachers' progress toward improvement.<br>– Recommends dismissal or nonrenewal when necessary in compliance with legal guidelines. |
| • Ensures effective and timely communications on the accountability system and progress to parents and the community. | • Analyzes data and other accountability measures and presents explanation in "user friendly" way to board, parents, and the community.<br>– Communicates, through the district's communications plan, use of and progress with accountability measures to improve student achievement.<br>– Ensures an annual report is developed that includes data on student achievement and district performance data related to goals and standards. |

# *Accountability*

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures funding to implement accountability measures. | • Presents budget recommendations and rationale to the board. |
| • Evaluates itself on board goals related to student achievement (see *Vision*). | • Works with board to develop its evaluation process. |
| • Uses data on student achievement as a measure to drive decision making | • Reports all information about student achievement and makes recommendations on needed changes. |
| • Ensures compliance with state accountability measures. | • Makes board aware of any state mandated reporting requirements for student learning.<br>– Ensures adherence at district and school levels.<br>– Shares data with board concerning state mandates. |
| • Ensures that parents receive annual personalized data on their children's achievement. | • Develops a system for providing parents with cumulative data that clearly traces individual progress from year to year and shows progress on meeting district standards.<br>– Ensures a system to provide information on district resources and available alternatives to parents whose students fail to meet district standards. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Initiates, adopts, and monitors policies related to accountability. | • Recommends to the board policies to encourage accountability.<br>– Implements policies adopted by the board and makes sure that they are carried out.<br>– Conducts periodic review with the board to recommend additional policies or policy revisions. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

- AE Accountability/commitment to accomplishment
- CBA/CBC Qualifications, powers, and responsibility of superintendent
- CBI Evaluation of superintendent
- GCE/GCF Professional staff recruiting/hiring
- GCI Professional staff development
- GCO Evaluation of professional staff
- GCQF Discipline, suspension, and dismissal of professional staff

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

CHAPTER VI

# ALIGNMENT

**QUIZ:**

***Which of the following resources need to be aligned to ensure that students meet standards?***

**a.** Funding
**b.** Staffing and personnel evaluations
**c.** Facilities

Answer: a, b, and c

The effective leadership team understands that standards will not be met and priorities not achieved unless the necessary resources and support are provided and aligned.

How the team uses its resources determines how close it comes to achieving its stated goals—and sends a message to staff and community about the seriousness of its intent.

Nothing conveys what is important to the school district more than its budget. If improving reading skills in the early years is a top priority but money available for improvement is directed at Advanced Placement offerings at the high school, the team is sending a mixed message.

The leadership team must determine how to spend its money to achieve its vision and goals. An important first step may be to determine an effective, fair process for making budget decisions.

Because education is a people-intensive business, decisions about staffing become critical. Whatever process the leadership team uses in this area, it should ensure support for the priorities that have been established to achieve desired student results.

A district's quality control begins with the curriculum. The curriculum must be directly tied to district and state learning standards if teachers and students expect to achieve the desired performance results. The leadership team must ensure that the curriculum is clearly sequenced from kindergarten through grade 12 in each content area to make sure students are being taught what they are expected to know at each grade level. The curriculum also must provide opportunities and accommodations for students with special needs so they can meet standards. The curriculum should serve as the framework and guide for classroom teachers without hampering any teacher's ability to help students.

Most school districts spend significant amounts of time and money on staff training. The leadership team should know what types of professional development are offered and how much of that training is tied directly to district

priorities. The team should ensure that training directly supports the desired academic results.

The team will also want to discuss and evaluate processes used to determine the selection of textbooks, instructional materials, and technology for consistency and alignment. Likewise, planning of new and renovated facilities should consider appropriate alignment.

Alignment is most likely to occur when everyone is clear about priorities, then directs available and additional resources toward achieving them.

## Key Action

Align resources to ensure that students meet standards.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Participates in training to better understand how alignment of the following resources are related to student success in meeting standards:<br>– Staffing and personnel evaluations<br>– Facilities<br>– Funding<br>– Curriculum and instruction<br>– Assessment<br>– Technology | • Works with the board to increase its awareness and understanding of how aligning resources can pay off in increased student achievement.<br>• Develops a process to ensure alignment of critical resources.<br>• Provides an annual update on alignment process. |
| • Ensures that curriculum alignment supports district policies and established priorities. | • Ensures development of curriculum directly tied to the learning standards set by the district and the state.<br>• Provides staff with the support, resources, information, and training needed to align instruction with curriculum.<br>• Reports to the board periodically and recommends additions or changes to ensure curriculum alignment. |
| • Recognizes and supports the authority of the superintendent to implement a district-wide organizational structure that empowers staff to meet the needs of all students. | • Aligns staff authority and responsibilities so that decisions for improving student achievement are made closest to the level at which they will be implemented.<br>• Reports to the board on progress and recommends changes. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Initiates, approves, and monitors policies to ensure that students are encouraged to challenge themselves by taking higher level courses. | • Recommends to the board policies and resources to encourage students to challenge themselves by taking higher level courses.<br>• Implements polices adopted by the board and makes sure that they are carried out equitably.<br>• Provides the board with data on student enrollment and success in higher level courses.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to identify additional policies or review existing policies. |
| • Considers students' instructional, social, and emotional needs when planning for improved student achievement. | • Develops a process for timely identification of students who are having difficulty meeting standards or who have social and emotional needs that affect their academic performance.<br>• Informs the board of assistance available to students, including tutoring, summer school, remediation, transition classes, conflict resolution, and so on.<br>• Reports to the board the success or failure of programs and policies designed to help students meet student achievement goals.<br>• Recommends changes or additions to programs and services based on student achievement data. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures staff development that will advance the district's student achievement priorities. | • Ensures a staff development program that supports student achievement priorities.<br>• Ensures that teachers and instructional staff are involved in setting staff development objectives and programs.<br>• Informs the board of staff development programs and their relationship to the district's student achievement priorities. |
| • Ensures a process for selecting textbooks and instructional materials that supports instructional priorities. | • Develops a process that involves staff and appropriate stakeholders in recommending textbooks and teaching materials that support standards and the district curriculum.<br>• Recommends to the board textbooks and materials.<br>• Monitors and keeps the board aware of the success or failure of textbooks and materials to support the reaching of student achievement goals. |
| • Ensures that technology is integrated into the curriculum to enhance student achievement. | • Develops a plan for the selection, use, and integration of technology into the curriculum to improve student achievement.<br>• Ensures that technology is selected and distributed in accordance with student achievement priorities and used by staff and students.<br>• Ensures staff development and staff proficiency in the use of instructional technology.<br>• Recommends changes in the technology plan as needed. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures school facilities and learning environments that support student achievement goals. | • Develops a long-range facilities plan to enhance the instructional program using a collaborative approach.<br>• Works with staff and experts in school construction to determine costs and prioritize projects.<br>• Recommends a prioritized facilities plan to the board, along with sources of funding.<br>• Secures funding for projects.<br>• Directs projects, ensures timely completion of projects, and monitors expenditures.<br>• Reports to the board periodically and recommends changes in the plan as needed. |
| • Approves budget allocations based on student achievement priorities. | • Recommends allocation of resources based on school or district student achievement priorities.<br>• Presents a recommended budget to the board based on resources needed to accomplish alignment.<br>• Monitors expenditures and periodically updates the board on status of the budget.<br>• Ensures effective communications explaining the district budget and how it relates to student achievement goals. |
| • Monitors progress of the district's instructional practices and programs as related to student achievement goals and supports needed changes. | • Ensures that school and district instructional strategies are in place to meet student achievement goals.<br>• Recommends to the board programs that need to be added or deleted based on analysis of data and district priorities. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures that the public understands how aligning curriculum and instruction and implementing standards leads to improved student achievement. | • Communicates, through the district's communications plan, how aligning curriculum and instruction and implementing standards leads to improved student achievement. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

- DA Fiscal management goals/priority objectives
- DB Annual budget
- FA Facilities development goals/priority objectives
- FJ Facilities renovations/improvements
- GA Personnel goals/priority objectives
- GCF Professional staff hiring
- GCI Professional staff development
- GCF Supportive staff hiring
- IJ Instructional resources and materials
- IJND Technology resources
- KEC Public concerns and complaints about instructional materials

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

CHAPTER VII

# CLIMATE

**QUIZ**

***Which of the following factors contribute most to a school climate that supports higher levels of achievement for your students?***

**a.** The board and superintendent share a philosophy that all students can learn at higher levels.
**b.** Elaborate security measures are installed to ensure that schools are safe from violence.
**c.** The district follows a regular process for monitoring and analyzing such data as student attendance, discipline records, teacher attendance, and surveys of students, staff, and parents.

Answers: a and c

Effective leadership teams understand the powerful effect that climate has on the behavior and performance of teachers and students and on the perceptions of the community. Not only do effective teams support values such as respect for others, civility, integrity, and inclusion but these teams also model the behavior they expect from others.

Effective leadership teams take steps to ensure that the values emphasized by the school system are in fact driving and shaping the climate of schools. For example, if school staff members say they value parents as partners yet do little to accommodate working parents' schedules, their words do not match their actions. If the district philosophy states that all children can learn, yet some schools repeatedly have low student achievement, changes need to occur or the philosophy has no credibility.

Climate and the learning environment set the stage for teaching and learning. Both the overall climate of a school and the specific learning environment of an individual classroom have enormous influence on student achievement. Students cannot learn in a climate of chaos, fear, or embarrassment. They need to feel safe, and they need an orderly, supportive structure.

The leadership team has these responsibilities:

- To ensure a safe environment for work and learning.
- To examine the available data reflecting climate and use surveys to determine the perceptions of students, staff, and parents.
- To provide programs to meet special instructional needs of its students.
- To communicate regularly with key stakeholders.
- To make schools inviting places to visit and in which to learn.
- To recognize and reward students, staff, and schools for high achievement and for improved achievement.
- To ensure a culture that supports the philosophy that all students can achieve.

## Key Action

Create a positive learning environment or climate for improving student achievement.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Fosters a culture that supports the belief that all children can learn at higher levels in these ways:<br>– Employing and supporting a superintendent who shares that philosophy<br>– Developing and revising policies to reflect this philosophy<br>– Providing safe schools where a learning environment of trust and respect are top priorities in every school. | • Develops a plan for recruiting and retaining qualified staff.<br>• Ensures employment of qualified staff.<br>• Ensures a staff evaluation process that supports student achievement goals.<br>• Recommends assistance for staff who are not meeting evaluation criteria, followed by dismissal recommendations if necessary.<br>• Develops and revises policies to meet student achievement goals, to ensure recruitment and retention of qualified staff, and to ensure a safe student learning environment. |
| • Provides orientation for board candidates and for new board members on expectations for student achievement. | • Works with the board to develop an orientation model for board candidates and new board members. |
| • Approves and monitors programs designed to meet the special instructional needs of students who are not meeting achievement goals or standards. | • Recommends instructional programs or approaches for special instructional needs based on data and best practices.<br>• Provides updates to the board on these special programs.<br>• Institutes a process for evaluating programs and recommends needed changes to the board. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Provides adequate resources to meet student achievement goals through the budgeting process and monitors the budget regularly. | • Communicates with the board about resources needed to meet student achievement goals before developing a budget.<br>• Develops the budget on the basis of student achievement goals and discussion with staff and key community groups.<br>• Recommends the budget to the board.<br>• Reports monthly on implementation of the budget and allocation of resources. |
| • Recognizes and rewards staff and students for high academic achievement and high levels of improvement. | • Develops and recommends to the board a plan for regular recognition of students and staff.<br>• Carries out recognition programs. |
| • Conducts all board meetings with curriculum and instruction as a clear focus and student achievement as the clear goal. | • Works with the board chairman to develop a board agenda with a focus on curriculum and instruction and student achievement as the goal.<br>• Coordinates staff presentations for board meetings. |
| • Models respect, professional behavior, and a commitment to continuous learning<br>– With board colleagues<br>– With superintendent and staff<br>– With parents and students<br>– With the community. | • Models respect, professional behavior, and a commitment to continuous learning<br>– With board members<br>– With the staff<br>– With parents and students<br>– With the community. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Serves as advocates for excellence in education and higher student achievement in the community and also at the state and federal levels. | • Serves as an advocate for excellence in education and higher student achievement with the staff and the community.<br>• Works with the board to provide information needed for understanding and communicating student achievement goals to the community.<br>• Serves as an advocate for higher student achievement with state and federal officials. |
| • Ensures periodic assessment of school climate throughout the district, including<br>– Attendance data<br>– Discipline data<br>– Surveys of students, staff, and parents<br>– Enrollment in higher level classes<br>– Staff turnover<br>– Student enrollment trends. | • Identifies and implements surveys or other means of assessing the school climate for high student achievement.<br>• Collects, compiles, and analyzes data related to school climate.<br>• Reports periodically to the board on the results of school climate assessments and data trends and recommends changes.<br>• Ensures that appropriate changes are made.<br>• Recommends additional policies or policy revisions. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Ensures a safe and orderly learning environment in all schools. | • Works with the board to develop appropriate policies and revise policies as needed.<br>• Ensures that actions are taken to implement board policies.<br>• Reports periodically to the board on issues related to school safety.<br>• Makes changes as necessary.<br>• Makes recommendations for board action as indicated by need.<br>• Collaborates with other community officials, organizations, and groups to review and update district safety and emergency management plans.<br>• Ensures staff training on appropriate safety and emergency measures at each building. |
| • Builds public support for higher student achievement and increases public trust in the district through formal and informal communication and through openness. | • Works with the board, the staff, and the community in an open, positive manner.<br>• Implements a district communication plan that ensures accurate information, regular channels for community involvement, and input and attention to customer services throughout the district.<br>• Ensures openness by district staff in relations with all stakeholders.<br>• Ensures a recognition program for volunteers, businesses, and organizations that work with the schools and the district to increase student achievement. |

## Climate

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

- BIA, BIB Board member orientation and development
- JI Student welfare/safety
- JIC Student discipline
- KA School-community-home relationship goals/priority objectives

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

CHAPTER VIII

# COLLABORATION

**QUIZ**

***Why must your leadership team build collaborative relationships?***

**a.** Issues are too complex to address successfully without help from the community.
**b.** The law says you must.
**c.** Real progress in student achievement depends on support from parents and other citizens.

Answers: a and c

The leadership team cannot create and sustain high student performance working alone. To be successful, the team must build networks of collaborative relationships with key stakeholders. Collaboration requires a level of trust and mutual respect that enables individuals to work together to solve common problems for the greater good.

In education, many of the issues the leadership team faces are so complex that individuals acting independently cannot resolve them. Neither can a board or superintendent working in isolation. The effective leadership team knows that promoting collaboration and cooperation requires bringing teachers, parents, students, and community members into the decision-making process with improving student achievement as the ultimate goal. The network of collaboration must also include the business community, higher education officials, politicians, community leaders, and all those that have a stake in your community's public schools.

Too many citizens and parents feel alienated from the schools because they no longer have children in schools, because they have heard negative things about the schools, or because they did not have positive experiences in school themselves. The leadership team that is committed to a collaborative approach will finds way to bring all of these people to the table and to enlist their help when needed.

Collaborative relationships require time and attention to cultivate and maintain. The leadership team that seeks to consciously build such relationships must practice inclusion of key community groups, invest in reflection and skill building, and model what it expects from others. This team then leads its school and community from a position of extraordinary strength that ensures support for higher student achievement.

## Key Action

Build and maintain collaborative relationships between the board and the superintendent, and the leadership team with the community including key political and business leaders to develop support for student achievement as a top community priority.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Fosters collaborative relationships as a board philosophy through<br>– Strategic planning<br>– Community vision<br>– Instructional improvements. | • Follows a collaborative approach in working with the board.<br>• Encourages the board and staff to involve key stakeholders in appropriate decision making both at the district and at the school level. |
| • Approves and periodically reviews a district plan to build collaborative relationships with key stakeholders at all levels based on gaining support for student achievement as the district's top priority. | • Recommends to the board a plan to build these collaborative relationships, leads a periodic review of progress, and implements agreed-on strategies for improved relationships.<br>• Keeps the board and others informed about the district's progress and solicits appropriate input for areas of concern. |
| • Models collaboration and trust. | • Works with the board to determine a process for periodic review of the leadership team's relationship and vision.<br>• Implements changes recommended through the periodic review. |
| • Advocates district positions on educational issues with legislators and other state and local political leaders and keeps abreast of other state and national issues. | • Assists the board in its advocacy efforts with public officials by arranging meetings, providing needed data and information, and scheduling other activities as needed. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Advocates student achievement as a top community priority. | • Provides data and relevant materials to assist the board in its advocacy role.<br>• Teams with board members to speak to groups within the community. |
| • Ensures a climate of open communications at board meetings and throughout the district. | • Ensures a climate of open communications, both internally and externally.<br>• Ensures a user-friendly process for public input at board meetings.<br>• Ensures a user-friendly and responsive process for concerns at the school and district levels. |
| • Initiates, adopts, and monitors policies related to collaboration. | • Recommends to the board policies to encourage collaboration.<br>• Implements policies adopted by the board and makes sure they are carried out.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to recommend additional policies or policy revisions. |
| • Provides funding and resources for collaborative efforts. | • Presents budget recommendations needed to support collaborative efforts and initiatives. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

- KB Parental involvement in education
- KC Community involvement in education
- KD Public information and communications
- KE Public concerns and complaints
- KG Business and industry involvement in education
- KJ Relations with community organizations
- KK Relations with professional organizations
- KL Relations with government authorities
- KM Relations with cultural institutions

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CHAPTER IX

# CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

**QUIZ**

***Making curriculum or instruction changes to ensure continuous improvement should be based on which of the following?***

**a.** Relevant data on student achievement
**b.** Recommendations from interested parents
**c.** What your district can afford in its budget

Answer: a

Continuous improvement, the opposite of complacency, is not just a process; it is an attitude or mindset that must be cultivated and reinforced. This attitude stresses quality and rewards those who achieve it.

The leadership team that believes in continuous improvement encourages probing questions, frank discussions, and data-driven analysis about existing programs and practices. The board's role is not to micromanage but to work cooperatively with the superintendent to promote improved practices.

Continuous improvement becomes a way of thinking about everything the leadership team undertakes, encouraging a different perspective about the organization and how it works.

Accompanying the continuous improvement process is an increased awareness on the part of team members concerning who they serve and who serves them. This emphasis on customer focus throughout the organization builds the collaborative relationships that are essential for high student achievement.

Continuous improvement depends on timely, accurate data. Accurate data empowers the leadership team and staff to seek ways to refine, strengthen, modify, or eliminate existing programs and practices in the name of improvement. Continuous improvement requires that attention be given to *who* needs *what* data *when* and *how* it is presented and used. The objective of continuous improvement is to find better, more efficient, and more effective ways to work.

Finally, continuous improvement is a journey, not a destination. Continuous improvement never ends. The mindset of continuous improvement is to question, examine, revise, refine, and revisit.

## Key Action

Commit to a process of continuous improvement for student achievement.

| The School Board | The Superintendent |
|---|---|
| • Ensures a regular process to review student achievement data to ensure continuous improvement. | • Recommends to the board a process for continuous improvement.<br>• Sets and reviews benchmarks and performance indicators that demonstrate student progress related to the district's strategic plan and standards.<br>• Provides clear analysis of relevant data related to student achievement.<br>• Seeks input from professional staff on changes needed to strengthen instructional programs.<br>• Recommends changes to instructional programs indicated by data and staff input. |
| • Takes part in training on principles of continuous improvement, including use of data and customer focus. | • Schedules training on principles of continuous improvement and participates with the board.<br>• Ensures ongoing training for all employees on principles of continuous improvement.<br>• Ensures professional development to build understanding of information provided by data and to encourage staff participation in needed changes. |
| • Participates in work sessions to better understand needed changes in curriculum and instruction based on related data. | • Presents information to the board on needed changes in curriculum and instruction.<br>• Explains data to support recommended changes. |

| THE SCHOOL BOARD | THE SUPERINTENDENT |
|---|---|
| • Provides funding for continuous improvement. | • Reviews curriculum and instruction plans and costs as part of the board's budget planning.<br>• Presents budget recommendations to the board on resources needed for continuous improvement |
| • Initiates and adopts board policies that support continuous improvement. | • Recommends policies needed to support continuous improvement.<br>• Conducts periodic review with the board to identify additional policies needed or to revise existing ones. |
| • Supports publicly and communicates the value of continuous improvement to the community. | • Communicates the process and results of the district's continuous improvement efforts to key stakeholders as part of the district's communications plan.<br>• Communicates both proposed and approved curriculum and instruction changes to stakeholders affected, such as students, staff, and parents. |

**RECOMMENDED SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES (USING THE NSBA POLICY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM)**

- DAA Evaluation of fiscal management
- EAA Evaluation of support services
- FAA Evaluation of facilities plans and development
- GAA Evaluation of personnel system
- IL Evaluation of instructional programs
- JAA Evaluation of student policies and services
- KAA Evaluation of school-community-home relations

(The school boards association in each state can provide policy services for local school districts. NSBA also has sample policies available for its National Affiliates.)

PART 2

# PROFILES OF TEAM LEADERSHIP

CHAPTER X

# Beaumont Independent School District Beaumont, Texas

Located near one of the largest natural ports in the United States, with a diversified economy that includes the petrochemical and logging industries, this small urban community in Southeast Texas had everything going for it—everything, that is, except its public schools. In the early 1990s, the Beaumont Independent School District was functioning so poorly that the Texas Education Agency sent in monitors to oversee it. Many families were leaving town or opting for private schools, and new businesses refused to locate in the community. Although residents had approved a $56 million bond issue to rebuild schools, construction was at a standstill. Wracked by a history of divisiveness and racial tension and governed by a school board whose lengthy meetings were marked by political infighting and deadlock, the school district seemed mired in failure.

Today, a decade later, Beaumont is very much an urban success story. Enrollment is now at a 10-year high, the dropout rate is low, and student achievement is climbing steadily across the district. The National Alliance of Black School Educators named the Beaumont board the National Urban Board for 1999-2000, citing its success in decreasing the achievement gap between majority and minority learners. That same year, the Texas Association of School Boards/Association of School Administrators named the district's superintendent, Carrol A. Thomas, Superintendent of the Year.

## A Clear Vision

The district's success demonstrates what can be accomplished when the superintendent and school board function as a leadership team that has a clear, consistent, and structured vision of excellence in public education. By remaining dedicated to the mission that all children will learn—and by providing the necessary resources—the board and superintendent have, in their own words, brought the 20,000-student school district "from the edge of a precipice to a mountaintop where the view of the future is breathtaking."

In 1996, determined to improve the district, the seven-member school board took an important step—it voted unanimously to hire Thomas as superintendent. Thomas, who had helped another district make a similar turnaround, was a man who liked a challenge, and he found one in Beaumont. "The school board's commitment to change was most exemplified by its willingness to risk hiring the district's first African-American superintendent in more than 100 years," says Thomas. "The action sent a strong message to the community. On a personal level, it was a very strong message to me. Their expectations of me were very high, and my expectations of myself were even higher."

School board members also resolved to operate more professionally, to avoid micromanagement, and to focus on policymaking, planning, and evaluation. The

board quickly moved to limit school board meetings to three hours—which "put a stop to miscellaneous bickering and filibusters," says Board President Martha Hicks. The board hired a secretary to administer board affairs. Members received specialized training in budget and administration and participated in other training sessions on various topics conducted through the region's educational service center, the Texas Association of School Boards, Lamar University, and an area governmental association. Board members, says Hicks, renewed their commitment to the children of Beaumont and allowed Thomas to be the superintendent they hired him to be—a man whose integrity, high standards, and peacemaking and coalition-building skills could bring harmony to the troubled district.

The superintendent and board moved quickly in several directions at once, both programmatically and administratively. A 1995 review of the district's management and performance by the Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts included recommendations to maximize the efficiency of instructional support and administrative functions. To improve operations, the leadership team set in motion a planning and decision making process that uses participation, information, research, and evaluation to set and consistently meet goals to achieve the school system's vision. Under Thomas, the district's motto became "No excuses—just results."

The first educational obstacle to overcome was an untenable racial integration plan that mandated which schools students could attend. The Beaumont district, which is 65 percent African American, 24 percent white, and 8 percent Hispanic, was created when two school districts—one largely poor and minority and the other largely white and prosperous—merged in 1983. To develop a new student assignment plan that satisfied citizens, Thomas and the school board held three open forums to gather community input. Through a variety of hearings, discussions, and interviews, the community made clear that it wanted to maintain stability and neighborhood schools. It wanted to promote integration on a voluntary basis by continuing to allow "majority to minority" transfers, by developing magnet schools in low-income areas to ensure quality education and to attract students from the entire district, by having more than two high schools, and by giving parents greater choice about where to send their children.

After many conversations and alterations, the Student Assignment Plan went into effect in the 1997-98 school year. A magnet high school emphasizing the arts and technology and a magnet middle school were built in a low-income area. High school students can attend wherever they want in Beaumont, with consideration to campus capacity, although transportation, developed on a five-tier system that supports majority to minority transfers, is not necessarily provided. Thomas

says the plan, constructed to allow as much flexibility as possible, is in compliance with federal integration mandates. During a recent visit, a team from a unit of the Texas Education Agency charged with monitoring compliance complimented the district on its responsiveness to parental concerns and on the equity of choice and opportunities available at all campuses. "We believe the system is working, and the important part is that the complaint level is at zero and has been for the past four years," Thomas says.

### INSTRUCTIONAL INTERVENTIONS

The next step was to build an education program to improve achievement and reduce disparities between racial groups. The superintendent and board set in place a mastery learning plan whose core is the "reteach policy"—which means that students do not move forward until they have mastered key subject matter. Under the board's policy, reteaching can take a variety of forms—from having a teacher repeat the concept to finding different materials or teaching modalities to present the concept again. If reteaching efforts are not sufficient, teachers may use a more complex process of remediation, which includes analyzing the learning task, further diagnosing the student's needs, and suggesting remedies—for example, requiring a student to attend a tutorial program or remedial class or to complete additional work on a particular unit.

In addition, district peer-assistance teams have been developed and, Thomas says, "have been phenomenally successful in helping underachieving students." ExxonMobil, which has a major headquarters in Beaumont, gives the district $165,000 annually for a program that underscores the importance of reading skills. The district also received a $3.5 million National Science Foundation grant to teach mathematics and science, and more than $17 million in state and federal funds have been allocated to support disadvantaged students—who make up nearly 62 percent of the district's student population.

Educationally, the board and superintendent also focused on rewriting curriculum and aligning standards, recasting job descriptions, and bringing board policy up to date. Using guidelines from the Texas Association of School Boards, the Beaumont board instituted policy updates to bring Beaumont in line with the majority of other districts in the state; the administration now sends home student handbooks and a student Code of Conduct during the first week of school.

For teachers, staff development became a major priority. In addition to training in diversity, there was also a staff focus on instructional programs, curriculum guides, scope-and-sequence documents, inquiry learning, and technology integration. The district awards financial incentives for student attendance and increases in test scores. Performance incentive pay has increased significantly, and the num-

ber of employees receiving awards has grown from 1,114 to as many as 1,549 per year. With substantial salary increases and liberal benefits, Beaumont teachers are now among the best paid in Southeast Texas.

"As superintendent, I set the example for professional development by conducting training for superintendents, administrators, and educational leaders throughout the state," says Thomas. "Teachers and administrators are encouraged to take advantage of learning opportunities every time they are offered." These cumulative educational efforts have resulted in increased academic achievement across the district.

### FISCAL ACCOUNTABILITY

While moving ahead with educational improvements, the superintendent and school board reorganized the business affairs of the district. The district's consistent policy of financial accountability at all levels won an award for financial reporting achievement from the Government Finance Association. Public support for the schools—in the form of increased enrollment and attendance and rising property values—have brought the district an additional $7 million during the past several years.

District leaders also renegotiated construction contracts and restarted a facilities plan that had been stalled for years by partnering with ExxonMobil to complete the projects. With the help of an engineer on loan from ExxonMobil—who became the project manager for all construction projects undertaken as part of the $56 million 1994 bond issue—all school construction and renovation projects were completed last year. They include a new middle school, a new elementary school campus, and extensive retrofits to other schools. Now, says Board President Martha Hicks, the district is conducting a facilities study that will aid in financial planning for the next 10 years and will enable the board to accurately project expenditures required for the next bond election.

### COMMUNICATION

To build a school system focused on academic success, the superintendent and school board worked to improve communication and team-building skills.

Thomas emphasized high standards, ethics, diplomacy, and "information, information, information," says Hicks. The superintendent, she explains, has proven that "full disclosure and appropriate timing of information can generate trust, improve decision making, and build a team approach to problem-solving." Once board members began to receive the same reliable information from one source—the superintendent—and had all their questions satisfactorily answered, they began to project a cohesive image to the public and to speak with a unified

voice. Individual board members no longer attempted to solve the problems of patrons and employees—a practice that had cost the board its credibility and kept members from being invited to many civic functions. "Now, whenever a civic event is occurring, the BISD Board of Trustees members are always in demand," says Hicks.

As community members realized that the school board and the superintendent were making substantial progress in improving the district, they became more supportive of the school system. Giving residents an opportunity to be heard was the key. To resolve the thorny issue of the student assignment plan, for example, the superintendent held town meetings and now routinely has town meetings, attended by the board, whenever serious issues arise. The school district also holds a Goals Night within the first month of school and two parent-teacher conference nights during the school year. An Urban Education Summit, which helps parents develop skills to enhance their children's academic performance, draws more than 3,000 people annually. The district also has a key communicator list, which receives monthly updates and newsletters, a periodic television show, and an award-winning Web site. Extensive media coverage of the school district also helps to keep parents informed. "Certain segments of the community felt they had no voice in the district's decision-making process, but now they feel empowered," says Thomas.

One result of better communication is that citizens are volunteering in the schools. Parental involvement has increased by 43 percent from 1998, and business and volunteer partnerships translate into almost $3 million annually in contributions, time, and in-kind support—"an impossible feat six years ago," says Hicks.

### TEAM-BUILDING SESSIONS

The entire board and superintendent participate in an annual retreat that improves their ability to work together as a team and to assess the progress of the district. The superintendent and board members carefully research areas that affect the district's educational standards—standards that are integrated into strategic planning goals and objectives at all levels. The team looks at a variety of data but insists on coupling statistics with common sense and experience. "It is important in using data to remember that these statistics represent people—students, their environments, teachers, and the thoughts, mind-sets, emotions, and individual goals may or may not always be reflected in data," explains Thomas. "Effective data in public schools must be a combination of empirical experience and statistics."

Reviewing both "hard" statistical data and more subjective input from teachers, administrators, and patrons, the superintendent and board members determine where the curriculum needs a push and which groups are responding to certain teaching methods and which are not. The school board gains a clear picture of the workings of daily classroom life and of the district as a whole. "Board members feel free to express their opinions and concerns in these retreats, and the open communication is one of the most important keys to success," says Thomas. Although the board also addresses facilities needs, responding to academic challenges is the retreat's overall goal. Planning for the 2001-02 school year has focused on preparing for changes in the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills.

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Knowing from hard experience what it takes to improve a school system and develop and sustain a strong leadership team, Beaumont's superintendent and school board offer the following advice to other districts interested in working together to foster student achievement:

- Keep communication lines open between the board and parents and patrons. Keep everyone informed and be honest. Most of all, do what you say you will do and be equitable and fair in decision making.
- Make sure everyone understands that the mission is to educate children. Although board members don't always have to agree, they do have to be united in pursuit of one goal—education for all the district's children. "Everyone has to have the same vision and be willing to keep discussions on an intellectual level without introducing emotion and past misgivings into decision making," says Thomas.
- Abide by the "ethics" sections of board policy. By doing that, much of the personal agenda making that causes divisiveness among board members will disappear.

Some specific accomplishments of the Beaumont Independent School District include:

- In the past four years, exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test scores have improved by 79 percent for all tests taken. Dramatically, scores of African-American students have improved by 121 percent on all tests, with a 103 percent improvement in mathematics since 1996. Economically disadvantaged students showed a 124 percent improvement in the same time period.
- Although the Texas Education Agency had rated district schools "acceptable" in the past, one elementary school recently received "exemplary" status and 16 schools were "recognized" for outstanding achievements.

- The district as a whole came within less than a percentage point of gaining "recognized" classification from the state agency. All of BISD's students are performing at a high rate of achievement. Reading scores were up by 21 percent, mathematics scores by 67 percent, and writing scores by 17 percent overall.
- In addition, the U.S. Department of Education named two BISD schools "blue ribbon" schools and also recommended the district to the Japanese Education Department as an example of a world-class school district..
- Attendance is at a 10-year high with an enrollment of 20,827 students, and average daily attendance is between 96 and 98 percent.
- The dropout rate has been reduced from 3 to 1.3 percent.
- Between 1996 and 2000, enrollment in gifted and talented programs increased by 125 percent at the elementary school level and 41 percent at the secondary school level.

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CHAPTER XI

# Daviess County Public Schools Owensboro, Kentucky

When former President Bill Clinton went on a four-state tour to promote school reform and educational accountability in May 2000, he underscored his key point— "Income is not destiny"—at an elementary school in Daviess County, Kentucky. Located in a semi-rural, blue-collar area in the Western Coal Field region of Kentucky, the school, Audubon Elementary, ranked second in the state in reading, although nearly two-thirds of its 450 students are poor. Audubon and Whitesville, another Daviess County public school that serves low-income children, have won national recognition from the Title I program, a federal program that aids students in high-poverty schools.

For many residents of Kentucky, it came as no surprise that the Daviess County Public Schools were showcased as a school district that has successfully narrowed the educational gap that exists between poor and more affluent students. The school system—which has about 33 percent of its 10,000 students eligible for free and reduced-price lunches—is one of the highest-performing districts in the state, and the leadership of its Superintendent, Stu Silberman, and its school board has been widely praised. "From the superintendent on down, there's just no doubt that they're focused on achievement, and they're focused on using the data to figure out what to do," said Robert F. Sexton, executive director of Kentucky's Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, in an article in *The National Journal.*

The superintendent and the school board have achieved success because they work hard as a team to implement the school district's deeply held philosophy: "It's About Kids." "Everything that is done and every decision made is based upon what is best for kids," the district states in its newsletters, on its Web site, and on its T-shirts and flags.

### A Two-way Street

When the superintendent was hired in 1995, he soon learned that the first order of business was to improve communications with the board and with staff. Even before he officially came on board, Silberman met on weekends with groups of employees in order to learn the district's strengths and weaknesses. After learning that communication was a roadblock for the district, Silberman implemented the "24-hour phone call"—meaning that employees had to return telephone calls within 24 hours of receiving the call. Silberman also organized weekly cabinet meetings with central office administration and had e-mail updates from the cabinet meetings sent to all employees. And since he wanted communication to be a two-way street, Silberman continued to solicit feedback from principals, teachers, and the community. Each month, he meets separately with seven advisory com-

mittees and each spring with 30 groups of educators, staff members, students, and residents to discuss their needs and his performance.

Initially, communication with the board also needed to be improved. In the past, board members had not received sufficient information before board meetings and had to spend long hours at board meetings trying to understand the issues presented to them. Now, board members are given information through a weekly board letter, twice-monthly board luncheons, and board packets that are distributed a week before the actual meeting. The superintendent is also in contact with board members via e-mail and telephone on a regular basis. Even a "fender-bender" involving a school bus warrants an immediate call to each board member, and board members are never surprised by a constituent's call or a news story, because they have all necessary information about an issue beforehand.

However, the members of the leadership team are careful about what messages they send electronically or what issues they discuss over the telephone. "We do not make any financial decisions or take any votes except during board meetings," explains Silberman. "Phone calls and e-mails are to individual board members. We do not have electronic or phone conference meetings unless there is no other choice in the matter." Only once in six years has there been a conference call, Silberman says, and that was due to circumstances beyond the leadership team's control.

The weekly board letter contains a vast amount of information—from reminders for upcoming events to explanations of new issues that might arise. Board members can choose to read either a one-paragraph summary or a more detailed version if they wish to study an issue in more depth. The letter also contains the superintendent's calendar, to let board members determine the best times to contact him. In addition, since board members need adequate time to process information, the superintendent tries to send materials at least three to four weeks ahead of any vote.

### RETREATING TO THE BOARDROOM

To increase its ability to plan ahead and to evaluate how well the district is accomplishing its goals, the board holds an annual retreat in the boardroom. "We used to go away but we felt we could accomplish the same things by staying at home at no cost," says Silberman. "Basically, we talk about big issues that are coming down the road to give everyone a chance to get their initial feelings on the table and to be able to hear different points of view. We also talk about what is working, what is not working, and where we need to be heading. We discuss priorities for the future of the school district." Last year, the leadership team

decided it needed even more time for discussions, so it set up two retreats this year.

The retreats are very worthwhile, according to the five board members, John Ed Dunn, Mary Tim Griffin, Dwight Lovan, Joe Overby, and Frank Riney. "It gives the board members the opportunity to analyze the past and look toward the future in an effort to set goals and a direction for the district that will best serve our students," they say. "With the number of issues that are faced by school districts now, the opportunity to thoughtfully reflect upon where we want to go and where we want to be 10 years from now needs the opportunity for open and thorough discussion and reflection which simply is unrealistic to occur during a board meeting."

Board members say that they have found *Getting There from Here,* a report published in 1997 by the New England School Development Council and the Educational Research Service, to be helpful. Based on a year-long national study of 10 school districts, the report provides recommendations for developing an effective governance team that supports improved student achievement.

During the retreats, the board conducts a self-evaluation—completing a five-page document that allows board members to examine and evaluate all aspects of their performance. The document presents several statements to which board members respond.

One example: "Board members make public statements of a positive nature to support the district." The information drawn from board members' evaluation of this statement "provides a good perspective for each of the board members as to what we may be communicating to the public. Although board members are individuals, our actions and our words as a legal entity come only from our board meetings," the board explains. "The messages we convey there should be the most important message available." If board members communicate positive news at board meetings, citizens who attend the meetings or read newspaper accounts will realize the board believes it can successfully resolve any problems that may arise, the board explains.

The board credits Silberman with applying his sensitivity and skill at moderating discussions on issues on which board members may hold different views. The board is able to reach consensus because members articulate their own ideas, trust that their ideas will be respected even if not accepted, and listen to others. "We take time, even if it means delaying action, to seek a workable solution, with the superintendent encouraging us to keep the kids' needs foremost in our minds," the board says. "The majority of the time, decisions are not difficult to make.

When we ask ourselves, 'Is it the right thing to do for all the kids?' it helps us focus on the issue to make the best decision."

While communication has been important in developing the mutual trust and respect so necessary in a good team, "total honesty" has been another key quality, says Silberman. "We do not keep any secrets, and we do not hit each other with any surprises. We also take the time to listen to each other, and there is give and take. The same factors that go into making a good marriage go into strong board-superintendent relationships."

### INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM

Using their well-honed communications skills, the board and superintendent brought the community into the planning and implementation of an innovative curriculum approach called Graduation 2010, which began with a 1997 kindergarten class that will graduate in 2010. The program, based on current research about the brain and the nature of student learning, aims to increase the learning capacity of all students by using music, art, and language to strengthen neurological connections in students' brains.

The program, which has been featured on national television and which won a 2000 Magna Award for excellence from the *American School Board Journal*, maps out a 13-year program of studies for all the students in the district, with particular emphasis on children in the primary grades. More than 5,000 elementary students are involved in the program, which has eight components: the arts, music, foreign languages, reading, critical thinking, health/emotional health, family involvement, and community involvement. All elementary and middle schools are equipped with Yamaha keyboard laboratories, and music teachers provide weekly lessons. Some schools even broadcast Mozart during lunch. All elementary students attend cultural performances, and there are professional workshops in dance, theater, and the visual arts. In addition, students learn Spanish and play chess—which contributes to their ability to think critically, district leaders believe.

When it was considering the program, the leadership team held a public kick-off to announce that the district would be studying a new direction that it might take. "We gave a brief overview and told the community they would have an opportunity to participate in the design of the project," Silberman recalls.

The district's Graduation 2010 Committee, consisting of board members, parents, community leaders, and school staff members, reviewed the latest neurological research to determine how it could be used to provide students with the opportunity for higher achievement. "After the steering committee did the research we needed, we then opened it up to the public to share the results. At

this same meeting, we asked for volunteers to participate on each of the committees that would design each component," says Silberman. About 165 of the 200 people who attended the meeting joined committees. "We had a lot of community involvement in the development of the program. By doing this we were able to hear, from our constituents' perspectives, what might work and what might not work before we ever implemented any of the components," says Silberman. "Parents of all kids want the best for their children, and our community was able to see that this was good for all kids. Actually, it levels the playing field for all kids, no matter what their socioeconomic level happens to be."

"The buy-in was almost immediate," the board members add. "We felt like we had nothing to lose and everything to gain. No sites were visited because we knew of no other programs like this. We may be pioneers in this effort, with Superintendent Silberman blazing the trail."

To pay the project's $1.09 million price tag, the board made budget reallocations and the district sought funding from the federal government, foundations, and corporations. Community partnerships were essential: Four businesses have each adopted one class and will stay with that class for 13 years. Owensboro Mercy Health System, the county's largest employer, was the project's first sponsor, adopting the class of 2010. The businesses hold special activities with their students throughout the school year—tutoring, teaching certain units, or simply having milk and cookies with their kids.

Researchers from Western Kentucky University will track students to determine whether the program works. Until then, educators will not know with certainly how much impact the program will have on test scores, but many district educators are saying that they believe the Graduation 2010 is a factor in the district's excellent test scores. "I can tell the difference," said Sharon Sauer, a teacher at Audubon Elementary, in an article in the *Courier-Journal* newspaper. "[The students] are catching on to reading faster. They're more mature that way because they have a more well-rounded background."

### OTHER CURRICULUM INITIATIVES

With the guidance of the superintendent and the school board, the district has also worked hard to align its curriculum with the Kentucky Core Content Tests, the state's criterion-referenced assessment tests. The district has a two-year consolidated plan that serves as a road map for enhancing student achievement and lists specific standards of student performance that must be accomplished by implementing various strategies and activities. Each school also has a consolidated plan that outlines goals, strategies, and objectives to enable students to reach higher academic standards. Strengthening curriculum is an ongoing process. Faculty

members and administrators meet annually to discuss what changes to make in the curriculum after analyzing test data, and many faculty members read the latest research on effective teaching practices and share it with colleagues.

The district's goal is to have each child at the "proficient" level by the year 2014, as measured by the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System. The Kentucky Education Reform Act, which set benchmarks for students in seven areas, gave schools until 2014 to make all students proficient in each area—and the latitude to design a curriculum to ensure that children reach the benchmarks in time.

Literacy is an important component of the district's plan. "We feel that our literacy standards, which were developed by our teachers, and the early assessment of student portions of the plan will be most successful," says Silberman. "Our plan is to make sure every regular education student is meeting the grade-level standards by the end of third grade." The district is already doing well in reading. When test results were recently released, only four students at the elementary level and four students at the middle school level were performing at the "novice" level in reading.

As the Graduation 2010 program has made clear, improving an educational program requires a long-term commitment. The district has been fortunate in its ability to retain experienced board members as well as attract new ones—and understands that school board members need to undergo a substantial learning process to be truly effective. "For any school district to be successful, the vision set by the superintendent and the board must also have the follow-through and evaluation process that is strengthened when those that step forward with the ideas remain to analyze whether the intent is being met," contends the board.

"Stability is important if we mean 'a consistency of purpose,' but if it means 'a resistance to change' it is not important," the board says. "New members bring another point of view, a new way of looking at issues. If this new view is positive, it can expand the board's vision for the school district. Enthusiasm and a strong interest in the growth of the youth of our community are primary requirements that keep board members vibrant. We have them."

The enthusiasm of the leadership team is evident in the school district's annual opening day celebration. The event, which includes staff and student performances, brings together the board and the district's support and certified staff for a light-hearted but highly motivational event. The yearly celebration of student and staff success contributes to the district's ability to sustain and improve academic achievement—by letting everyone in the Daviess County Public Schools know that "It's About Kids!"

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The leaders of the Daviess County Public Schools offer the following advice to other school districts interested in improving the effectiveness of their leadership team:

- Develop a common philosophy and mission for the school district.
- Schedule board retreats to work on tasks and set goals for the district.
- Communicate on a regular basis. The superintendent should let board members know in advance about any breaking news.
- Use board meetings to showcase students and their accomplishments. Each board meeting should have a few presentations focused on curricular issues featuring students from the district's schools. Recognize academic and athletic achievers at board meetings.
- Give board members the chance to advance their knowledge by serving on district-wide committees.

Students in the Daviess County Public Schools have consistently led Kentucky in state and national assessments:

- On national norm reference tests, such as the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), students score significantly above the national norm in all areas tested at all grade levels. Scores have stayed consistently above the national mean during the four years the CTBS has been a part of the state's assessment program.
- On the Kentucky Core Content Tests, the district consistently ranks among top 10 districts in the state. In fact, five Daviess County schools were recognized as being among the 31 schools in the state that have received financial rewards in every cycle of the state assessment program—the most from any district in the state.
- The Daviess County Public Schools enjoy a healthy relationship with nearby communities. Several partnerships have been forged through the Graduation 2010 program that include some financial assistance and resources as area businesses and organizations have adopted classes for their entire 13 years in the school system.

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CHAPTER XII

# DYERSBURG CITY SCHOOL SYSTEM DYERSBURG, TENNESSEE

In the early 1820s, when Joel Dyer bought 640 acres of land along the Forked Deer River in northwest Tennessee and decided to build a town there, he could not have foreseen Dyersburg's development. With 35,000 people, the city has the amenities and friendliness of small-town living, while its residents have access to a variety of medical services and recreational and cultural opportunities in the region. Dyersburg has a low cost of living, a low crime rate, and a moderate climate. A community with both farming and industry, it also has a retail mall that attracts visitors from a four-state area.

Perhaps most important for its 3,200 students, the community has made a sustained commitment to education. In 1993, *Redbook* magazine chose Dyersburg as one of the top 100 communities in the country that supports education, and the Dyersburg City Schools won the Governor's A+ Award for community commitment to education each year from 1991 until 1995, when the award was discontinued. "We are fortunate to have a community that supports schools," says Superintendent Lloyd Ramer. "This allows us to focus on student achievement issues rather than management issues that dominate many school systems. We do have a rigorous accountability put in place by our state legislature. However, our constituents are interested in what goes on in our schools for all 180 days, not just the results of our testing program."

The goal of the school board and superintendent has been to work together to improve a good school system, which they have done by focusing clearly on their objectives and implementing them in a steady, incremental way. By treating each other with respect, valuing professional development for themselves as well as for district staff, communicating well, and understanding each other's roles and responsibilities, the superintendent and school board have forged a strong leadership team that has achieved success for the Dyersburg City Schools.

## PLANNING FOR ALIGNMENT

A strategic plan guides the leadership team. In 1990, while on a school board retreat, the board drafted a five-year plan, a mission statement, and six broad goals; the plan was revised annually through 1995. During a 1996 board retreat, the school board put into effect a second five-year plan. Realizing how critical it was to have an aligned, well-articulated curriculum, the leadership team launched a key project—a curriculum and staff development initiative to bring consistency and coordination to instructional activities district-wide. The ongoing project involves the collaborative efforts of all instructional personnel and administrative staff. Its objectives include mapping the curriculum to eliminate repetitions and gaps; establishing outcomes and benchmarks and constructing assessments that correlate to the benchmarks; integrating the curriculum to promote relevance to

real life; matching the learner with developmentally appropriate activities and assessments; and providing a clear picture to parents of what is taught and when.

The district invested a great deal of time and money in the district-wide initiative, and although work remains to be done, the leadership team believes the school system has already seen many benefits, such as increased student learning, system-wide teacher collaboration, and a coherence to staff development activities. The school board receives regular status reports on the initiative, and parents can examine curriculum maps by topic, noting what is taught every month.

The superintendent and school board also work as a team to ensure continuous improvement and to see that their district not only meets but exceeds rigorous accountability standards of student performance established by the Tennessee Department of Education and the Tennessee legislature. Student academic performance is weighted heavily in the state's accountability formula, and school districts face high stakes: If a district fails to meet the standards, the state board of education can remove a school board and superintendent and appoint others it chooses to oversee the district's operation.

Although the Tennessee Department of Education changed its standardized test in 1998, Dyersburg's scores did not decline, as might be expected when a new test is introduced or a test is substantially revised. Rather, scores increased slightly. The leadership team contends that the increase in achievement can be attributed to a better-aligned curriculum and more authentic assessments that require students to think at a higher level.

"Our state issues a report card each year for the system and for each school. Information includes academic achievement, 'value-added' or student gains, attendance, dropout rate, promotion rates, ACT scores, and writing assessments," says Board Chair Elizabeth Horner. "Yes, we are interested in these criteria, but we are also interested in our students receiving a quality education that involves so much more than test scores."

As a result, the school board is willing to put resources into programs and services that enhance student learning, to support innovative programs and initiatives, and to nurture its teaching staff. Because the school district pays teachers well (averaging the 10th highest salary in the state), the superintendent can hire qualified and experienced teachers; a large percentage of the budget is allocated to ongoing staff development to increase teacher competencies. All new teachers are introduced at a board meeting and congratulated, and all tenured teachers, those selected Teachers of the Year, and retiring teachers are honored and recognized for their contributions at a banquet sponsored by the board.

### A STEP-BY-STEP APPROACH

When it embraces change, the leadership team works in an orderly, systematic way. Staff members first formulate a plan of action that demonstrates a need for change and then plan and implement effective strategies for changes in the delivery of instruction and assessment. The superintendent researches effective programs and provides detailed information to the staff, then asks the administrative staff to follow up with more research, staff development, teacher input, and an examination of the implications of the change for the entire school organization. Members of the administrative staff draft a long-range plan before the superintendent discusses a new direction or program with the board.

For example, the district has set a goal that 90 percent of students leaving the third grade will read and calculate numbers at grade level. "We set 90 percent as a goal because it raised the bar for our school system," says Ramer. "Research provided by the Reading Recovery Program states that 90 percent is an attainable goal."

The school system took a step-by-step approach to the issue, researching a variety of approaches to early literacy and determining that the nationally known Reading Recovery program was a workable one. Working with the Dyer County School System, the district funded the training of a Reading Recovery Teacher Leader at the University of Arkansas during the 1999-2000 school year. The next year, the school system fully implemented the Reading Recovery Program as one component of its broader literacy initiative. All K-5 teachers and assistants participated in intensive literacy training, which will continue for several years, as teachers learn to assess children's reading and writing strengths and weaknesses and to design instruction to fit individual needs. In addition, some teachers will receive additional training to establish model literacy classrooms. The district is considering using qualified, highly trained teacher assistants to conduct small literacy groups for kindergarten, second-, and third-grade students.

Because board members were interested in seeing Reading Recovery in action, the superintendent—who invites the board to a school for lunch on a regular basis—arranged what he calls "a lesson behind the glass" so board members could observe the program. "Watching the Reading Recovery lesson reminded me of how important individualized instruction is and how much we need to continue to stress low student-to-teacher ratio," says Horner. "Also, I saw how these teachers have learned new strategies from their own time as students in this new program. We need to continue to emphasize staff development and teacher training."

### TRAINING FOR EVERYONE

Another aspect of the leadership team's long-range planning capabilities is its ability to foresee future problems and propose solutions. One such problem was an expected shortage of competent administrators. In response, the district implemented an innovative leadership training program, called Requisites of a Leader, for all current administrators and teachers who aspire to be administrators. "This program provides live interactive training for our administrators and future administrators in five leadership areas—developing personal and systemic direction, accountability, human resources, profound knowledge of teaching and learning, and building culture and climate," explains Ramer. "We have excellent administrators; however, these programs give us an interesting way to keep up with the newest educational research that is available. Administrators are encouraged to try new ideas and concepts. Future leaders are provided valuable insights into the world of administration. Along with other staff development, workshops, and conferences, our administrators are encouraged to try new ideas that might work for them. Our emphasis on staff development has been a major plus for our school system."

In Dyersburg, professional development is a way of life not only for administrators and teachers but for the board and superintendent as well. Believing that staff development is the path to overall improvement, the members of the leadership team participate in numerous conferences and workshops to make themselves a more productive and effective team. Tennessee law mandates that school board members attend at least one course in the state's School Board Academy each year; all new members must attend an orientation session during their first year as a board member. For the Dyersburg leadership team, the mandated training is only the beginning. Board members attend many other professional development sessions at state and national conferences, where, they say, they continue to learn to build a productive, compatible team, make school board policy, gain public support, and establish standards of excellence in all areas of operations.

"The seminars have helped me better understand my responsibilities and role as a school board member," says Horner. The "board-superintendent relations" module, for example, helped the board form a team with the superintendent and encouraged board members to be better listeners, she says. Horner adds that all the board members have attended the Tennessee School Boards Association's Leadership Conference held yearly in Nashville. "I believe this conference helps renew our commitment and dedication to each other and to providing an excellent education for the children in the Dyersburg City Schools," Horner says. A workshop for new board chairmen helped her personally in working with the

superintendent and with other board members, and school law sessions have kept the board abreast of changing regulations.

The superintendent also attends 60 hours of CEO training a year that is provided by the state department of education and consists of workshops, training sessions, and conferences that superintendents can tailor to meet their individual needs. (Tennessee passed legislation several years ago that gave superintendents Chief Executive Officer, or CEO, authority.) "The ability to adapt the program to meet the needs of the system is important," Ramer says, "It also provides us with access to some of the nation's top educational consultants."

### ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS

The board and superintendent also place a high value on communication. Learning to listen to options and opinions allows them to compromise and cultivate a positive working relationship with each other, they say. Ramer communicates information, recommendations, and issues to the board before meetings, and the board follows procedure strictly during meetings. The result is mutual respect—the glue that holds focused, productive board meetings and relationships together. The bottom line: There are no surprises at board meetings from either the superintendent or board members.

"Communication and planning are obviously the keys to an effective board meeting," Ramer says. "Board members receive the agenda packet and background information one week before the meeting—ample time for questions or additional agenda items to be added." The board has a yearly agenda that is adopted at its first meeting, he says. "Board members are expected to familiarize themselves with the issues that are going to be discussed for that meeting. In addition, one other mailing is usually sent out each month with pertinent information. We keep the meetings in focus by keeping with the adopted agenda."

Trust is the other essential ingredient that has enabled the Dyersburg team to work so effectively together. The superintendent has been able to instill trust between the board and himself by striving to be knowledgeable in all areas and by being direct, forthright and honest in all his dealings with the board and the community. He will not recommend an action to the board without giving all members ample warning that it is coming and ample time to consider and investigate it. He structures board meetings in such a way that every minute is focused and productive.

Horner says that school board members have the highest opinion of Ramer's honesty, competence, and integrity and appreciate his willingness to be evaluated either at a retreat or in informal discussion. She also credits the superintendent with setting the appropriate tone of respect: "More than anything else, our excel-

lent relationship stems from Mr. Ramer's respect of each individual board member, each teacher and staff member in our system, and each parent and student," she says.

Ramer says he cannot take credit for any specific trust-building activities, but that "our board enjoys each other's company and respects the opinion of each other. We have a yearly weekend retreat. We make sure new members feel included and welcome," he says. "The TSBA leads the board in a self evaluation every other year. We truly have an outstanding board by anyone's standard."

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

To help other districts that want to build a strong leadership team, the superintendent and school board explain the factors that have been critical to their success and offer the following advice:

- Communicate, communicate, communicate! For all recommendations and presentations to the board, communicate honestly and directly. Provide valid research to support the recommendation, identify the primary stakeholders, and predict as well as possible the level of community and parent involvement, initial cost, long-term costs, expected results, and evaluation criteria. Help board members become as informed as possible so they can make good decisions from the beginning. Then, when the going gets tough—when staff resist change or a program reveals less-than-desirable program results—board members will have the ammunition to stand by their commitment.
- Be data driven. Give the board the benefit of valid research before launching into recommendations for a new project or program. Evaluate all projects and programs by collecting and organizing data to show effectiveness.
- Concentrate on growing professionally as board members and superintendent. Training will promote teamwork and smooth operations by clearly identifying roles and responsibilities, helping the team adhere to procedures, and keeping team members abreast of current trends and effective programs.
- Work to build a trusting relationship between the board and superintendent. Plan activities to accomplish the goal.
- Always be considerate of those being governed. Board members should go into the schools for arranged functions to learn more about the institutions and the people for whom they establish policy.
- Superintendents should establish a network to gain reliable information from a cross section of the community.
- Celebrate the school system's successes!

The Dyersburg City Schools have seen many positive results from their leadership team's commitment to excellence. Among the district's achievements are the following:

- Test scores, in general, have gradually increased. According to the "2000 Public School Report Card," published by the Tennessee Institute for Public Policy, Dyersburg City Schools ranked 11th out of 137 districts in the state in its overall "TAG" score, which measures both actual achievement and value-added gain scores, or how much students learned over the school year.
- The district's composite score on the ACT (American College Testing) Assessment has continued to improve gradually over the past few years. Dyersburg students' mean composite ACT score was the fifth highest of the 119 school systems in the state that administered the test.
- The school board was named School Board of the Year and is currently a Board of Distinction in a program administered by the Tennessee School Boards Association. A board of distinction has met the challenge of leadership in every area of board responsibility, as measured by 14 criteria. For example, a board of distinction has conducted a superintendent evaluation, developed or updated a five-year plan, reviewed the entire policy manual, and participated in a board self-evaluation and developed a plan for improvement.
- Community and parental involvement are growing. The Dyersburg/Dyer County Educational Foundation awarded a total of $6,500 in mini-grants to individual teachers. The Education Edge Program involves the school system, the Chamber of Commerce, and all area industries in efforts to prepare students to make the transition from school to the world of work.

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CHAPTER XIII

# Fort Wayne Community Schools Fort Wayne, Indiana

The Fort Wayne Community Schools faced a host of serious challenges in the mid-1990s. The school system—the second largest in Indiana—was funded below the state average, yet its needs were great, and growing. As several major corporate headquarters left the area, Fort Wayne saw significant numbers of higher-paying jobs disappear, only to be replaced by lower-paying ones. An influx of residents who spoke little or no English swelled enrollments in the district's English as a Second Language program. At the same time, the number of students in the free and reduced-price lunch program almost doubled; now, 42 percent of the district's 32,000 students qualify for meal assistance. Most important, poor and minority students were generally not making the academic progress the district wanted to see, and educators and citizens recognized that the students were not well prepared for a new state-initiated high-school qualifying examination and more rigorous state assessments.

The school board, divided and rancorous, had lost a good deal of public trust. But when the board hired Superintendent Thomas Fowler-Finn in 1995, board members agreed to become less involved in micromanagement and less combative at public meetings. They determined to work closely with the new superintendent to create a school system that functioned well for all its students—and to help close the minority achievement gap. Ultimately, the new leadership team succeeded in restructuring the school system—creating a district recognized for financial accountability, an outstanding curriculum, innovative programs, community and business partnerships, and leadership in minority achievement. Communication, mutual trust and respect, and a culture that values teamwork helped the leadership team transform the school district.

## PLANNING AND POLICY

With much to accomplish, Fowler-Finn and the school board needed to win the support of the community from the start. They initiated a community-based strategic planning process that emphasized student achievement, safety and security, district accountability, and staff development. The board sought foundation funding for the planning process and approved the hiring of a full-time manager. The process, which took a year and involved more than 300 community members, parents, and staff members, resulted in 12 strategies for improvement and 94 specific action plans to be implemented over a five-year period. The strategic plan, now undergoing its second revision, remains a key part of every board meeting. Resolutions for action are indexed to specific parts of the strategic plan, says School Board President Jon Olinger.

To reflect the plan's message and methodology, the board had to revise its policy manual from top to bottom. Working with a consulting firm that provides

legal and design expertise, the board, superintendent, and district administrators reviewed existing policies on a department-by-department basis and compared them with goals outlined in the strategic plan. Work is currently underway to create detailed implementation procedures for education and operation policies. The education policies have been aligned with the strategic plan—a major undertaking that was accomplished through teamwork and open communication.

The policy book also outlines specific chains of command for addressing district issues and parent concerns. By clearly stating the superintendent's responsibilities, defining the board/superintendent relationship, and explaining the procedure for handling public complaints and concerns, Olinger says, the policy book helps buffer the board and superintendent from a deluge of individual concerns that might lead to micromanagement.

### COMMUNICATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

Occasional retreats are one way board members learn from each other and build a solid team. With the help of a facilitator, the board, superintendent, and cabinet members address current issues in education. Because they allow ample time for frank discussions and exploration of each other's viewpoints, the retreats help forge closer working relationships among board members. The communication skills board members learned and honed at the retreats turned out to be especially useful when they had to tackle the potentially sensitive and divisive issue of redistricting.

Convinced by attendance data and projections that schools in certain areas were becoming overcrowded, the board commissioned the superintendent to work with the community to change school attendance areas, says Olinger. The superintendent and staff held numerous community forums, and board members attended sessions and continuously exchanged ideas and feedback with the superintendent. Using that input, the district designed a redistricting plan that reassigned various neighborhoods to new attendance areas and created school "clusters" to reduce the time students spend on buses. A "grandfather" clause allows students and siblings already attending a certain school to complete their years there.

The board voted unanimously to approve the changes, which have been implemented over a two-year period. "Because the community was included in the process from the very beginning—and had a voice in the final proposal that was presented to the board—they accepted the results and were very complimentary to the board at the time of the vote," says Olinger. "In fact, not one parent spoke out against the redistricting action—and that is very unusual in what is normally a highly charged, emotional issue."

To create a productive school climate and a sense of "ownership" for all employees, the leadership team decentralized funding and decision making. The team cut more than $2 million from the central office budget, reduced the number of decision makers at the top, and began promoting the central office as a service center to assist the schools in areas such as testing, curriculum, programs, and budgeting. More dollars were put into the district's six school areas, each consisting of a high school and several "feeder" schools. At the school level, each principal works with site councils made up of administrators, teachers, parents, and even students who determine their school's needs and goals, basing their decisions on a wide variety of academic, discipline, and other data. In addition, parents and staff are a regular part of the initial screening and interview process for hiring principals. As a result, says Fowler-Finn, the district is confident that the dollars it spends have a direct impact on students. "Empowering school-level staff has created a structure that promotes commitment, creativity, and a proactive approach to meeting the goal of success for all students," he says.

### CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

During decentralizing and redistricting, the board and superintendent kept achievement goals at the forefront. The school board and superintendent developed an award-winning, internationally benchmarked core curriculum. Fowler-Finn says the district is committed to an aligned curriculum that clearly delineates what skills and concepts are to be taught and then provides the support to both teach and test those skills and concepts. All schools—magnet and neighborhood alike—teach and test the same curriculum in the core subjects—which had not been the case in the past, says Fowler-Finn. With a core curriculum and a district-wide system of quarterly exams, he says, parents know their children will not be left behind in core subjects if they move from one school to another within the district.

While raising overall achievement was important, closing the achieving gap between majority and minority students was also a top priority. The district's student population is 36 percent minority, compared with a minority representation of only 18.7 percent in surrounding Allen County. In 1999, the board unanimously approved a statement to the staff saying, in part, that "there is no greater educational issue than the performance of our minority students." The board called on all staff members to "believe and support the notion that failure is not an option ... because our students are capable of achieving more." Following the board's call for action, Fowler-Finn founded the Network for Equity in Student Achievement (NESA), a national organization of urban school districts that has developed a database of information and resources and shares failures as well as

successes. NESA, which formed partnerships with the Educational Research Service and Temple University, creates data analyses and strategies to close the achievement gap.

Using what it has learned nationally as well as locally, the district set into motion a number of initiatives that have gone a long way to address the achievement gap. For example, a program for at-risk middle and high school students provides tutoring assistance, social skills strategies, and help in organizing studies and completing homework. A new discipline system, SMART (Student Management and Resource Teams), developed with the U.S. Department of Justice, outlines specific offenses and ranges of consequences and analyzes student/staff behavior patterns. "With our advanced computer tracking system, we are able to provide individual schools with specific data that their site councils can use to tackle discipline problems through preventive measures," says Fowler-Finn. In addition, an aggressive conflict mediation program—the only one in the state to use professionally trained, full-time mediators—has helped students find peaceful solutions to problems.

All the while, the district has remained committed to racial balance. Two years ago, the school board unanimously approved a board policy recognizing the importance of maintaining the racial balance achieved by desegregation agreements with the federal government. The district has six magnet schools that draw students from across the district and 47 neighborhood schools. Racial balance is maintained because the district offers school choice for all schools. "This has driven the Fort Wayne Community Schools toward a healthy competition with one another," says Fowler-Finn. "Neighborhood schools promote magnet focuses such as aerospace, technology, and biophysical science, while at the same time offering the same basic, core curriculum in all of the schools. Last year, 40 schools had waiting lists."

### EVALUATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

To ensure the best education, the school and superintendent put in place evaluation procedures that challenge the staff to excellence, says Olinger. "The board and staff have worked hard to make staff expectations quantifiable and well documented," he explains. Teacher evaluations are part of contract negotiations and are described in detail in the master contract negotiated with the Fort Wayne Education Association. A separate evaluation plan for administrators is founded on "mutual expectations," which administrators work out with their immediate supervisors and which help them keep focused on the district's strategic plan and the standards and goals established by the board and superintendent. More than

30 teachers out of a total of 1,840, and seven administrators, out of 203, have been terminated or have decided to leave as a result of the evaluation procedures, says Olinger. The district has been able to fill the slots by drawing applicants from its substitute teacher list, area universities, and other school districts in Indiana and across the country. Although the district has not been significantly affected by the nation's teacher shortage, it is working hard to recruit minorities. For the fourth consecutive year, *The Black Collegian* magazine named the district as one of the nation's top 100 employers.

Both the superintendent and the school board work hard to involve the community—and to remain accountable to it. One outgrowth of the strategic plan initiative was a renewed sense of the importance of the community and the district working together to ensure student achievement. Although the initial planning took place six years ago, the cooperative spirit has not dwindled, says Fowler-Finn. For example, the Study Connection, a mentoring program that serves more than 1,000 students, has attracted record numbers of volunteers each year. Each child in the program is matched with a community volunteer, and the two meet for an hour each week after school. Data show that Study Connection students have higher grades, says the superintendent. For example, in the 1999-2000 school year, 73 percent of students in the program improved their academic performance, 66 percent improved their behavior, and 80 percent improved their self-esteem.

Although money remains a constant issue, the leadership team has kept the district on a sound financial footing while seeking creative ways to increase funding. The Fort Wayne schools receive $4,950 per pupil, $253 below the state average. Despite the challenge of being underfunded, the district increased its general fund operating balance from a projected deficit in 1995 to a 5.2 percent balance today. The district has saved more than $5.3 million on insurance, personnel, and utilities (by such strategies as bidding for natural gas on the open market). Grants have increased from just over $1 million in 1995 to nearly $4 million in 1999.

Not long ago, the board and superintendent asked the community to work together to educate local and state legislators about the funding inequity, says Fowler-Finn. The result: a well-coordinated, cooperative lobbying campaign with the Fort Wayne Education Association called Children First. Brochures detailed the school system's needs, and the district made legislators' postal addresses, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers available to staff and PTA members, students, and parents. In addition, the leadership team discussed its legislative needs with the district's "key communicators"—parents identified by each school as leaders—and urged their involvement.

This organized, multifaceted campaign is serving the district well, says Fowler-Finn. During legislative sessions, board members, the superintendent, teachers, administrators, and parents make trips to the state capitol to lobby legislators. They also send hundreds of letters and e-mail messages. Their efforts have paid off: In the last budget cycle, the district received an increase greater than that given other school districts. And, in the recently completed state budget session, the Fort Wayne schools received a 5.1 percent increase for 2002 and a 4.2 percent increase for 2003—compared with a state average of 3.5 percent for each year.

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Based on its experience, the Fort Wayne leadership team suggests some methods other districts can use to build a successful leadership team that focuses on student achievement. Their suggestions include the following:

- Remember that teamwork is built on mutual trust and respect. Without it, working relationships fail.
- The superintendent should keep the school board informed about significant events, whether positive or negative—and provide the information on time and in advance of decision making.
- If one board member requests and receives certain information (keeping confidentiality and legal restrictions in mind), all board members should be offered the same information.
- The superintendent and board should work hard never to surprise each other in public.
- The superintendent and school board must be visible in the schools they serve. The leadership team's commitment to visiting schools, while time consuming, has given Fort Wayne teachers and other staff members a chance to express their concerns and be recognized.
- A leadership team should focus all its decisions on the measurable goals and objectives set forth in its district's mission statement and strategic plan.

The Fort Wayne Community Schools are showing marked improvement, as demonstrated by the following indicators:

- The number of high school diplomas awarded with academic honors increased from 136 in 1996 to 411 in 2000.
- In the 1999-2000 school year, the district's dropout rate was only 2 percent, down from 4.8 percent in the 1995-96 school year.
- The overall graduation rate has increased from 84.2 percent in 1995 to 95.2 percent in 2000. Despite the state-implemented Graduation Qualifying Exam, only 26 Fort Wayne students failed to graduate because of the test.

- A record number of parents, grandparents, and other adults earned their GED this year in the district's continuing education department, and the number of adult education courses and participants has grown.
- Fort Wayne elementary schools saw major improvements in their recent third-grade state assessment scores. Seventy-two percent of all elementary schools improved their total reading, total language, total mathematics, and total battery scores, compared with 1998. Sixty-five percent of elementary schools scored higher than anticipated on the total battery and on specific tests.
- The gap between minority and majority students has narrowed significantly in both third and sixth grades in the last few years. Normal curve equivalent (NCE) scores, which are tracked from year to year, showed both improved scores and a closing of the gap. For example, in grade six, 1997 NCE total battery scores for minority students were 38.2, compared with 54.1 for white students. In 2000, total NCE scores for minority children were 43.2, compared with 57.5 for white children, indicating a narrowing of the achievement gap.
- In secondary schools, the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses increased by 26 percentage points. Despite the additional students, AP College Board test results show that the percentage of students who scored 3, 4, or 5 (the highest possible score) increased by 24 percentage points.

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CHAPTER

XIV

# Fort Worth Independent School District Fort Worth, Texas

The public schools in Fort Worth, Texas—once the last major stop on the legendary Chisholm Trail that took cowboys and their longhorn cattle to northern markets—were deeply troubled in the early 1990s. Fort Worth, rebounding from the collapse of the oil industry and the shrinking of the defense industry a decade earlier, was attracting new business in telecommunications and other sectors. The companies needed a highly skilled workforce, but the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) could not deliver. Students had below-average reading skills. The achievement gap between poor, minority students and their more affluent white counterparts was widening. In fact, the district's research department projected that—if no changes were made to the instructional system—the state would rate 74 of the district's then 114 schools as low performing.

The school board and Superintendent Thomas S. Tocco were determined to make improvements. To address the myriad challenges the school system faced, the board and superintendent began building a culture and a system for change that has resulted in high levels of student achievement—as well as state and national acclaim. By developing team-building skills, displaying mutual respect and cooperation, and staying clearly focused on the needs of the district as a whole, the leadership team has been able to turn the troubled school system around. The dramatic changes—and particularly the district's ability to significantly narrow the gap in achievement levels between minority and non-minority students—led the Council of Great City Schools to name the FWISD one of the two most successful urban school districts in the nation.

To first ascertain community needs and expectations for the school system, the leadership team met with a wide variety of business and civic leaders, as well as parents and employees. The district developed a five-year strategic plan and initiated an array of new programs to increase student achievement. Because school safety was a community concern, the district developed a student Code of Conduct and undertook a citywide safe-schools campaign that involved the community. Understanding the need for broad public support, the team also developed alliances with business, the faith community, organizations representing minorities, and neighborhood associations.

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL REFORM

The first priority was improving the poor academic performance of Fort Worth students, and the leadership team took immediate and concrete steps at the elementary school level. A 1995 Elementary Schools Initiative (ESI) identified for reconstitution four traditionally low-performing schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students. Principals and teachers had to reapply for their positions, the number of instructional days was extended, additional staffing and

resources were made available, and extensive professional development was provided. Later, the ESI added four more schools, for a total cost of $2 million per year.

The initiative produced great achievement gains but caused the leadership team to take a hard look at resource allocation—a process that offered a valuable lesson. When the ESI was implemented, some board members said they believed the school system was putting large amounts of money into a few schools, to the detriment of others. And since the administration had not pinpointed exactly which resources—new math and reading initiatives, for example, or longer contract days for staff—were most effective, the board was not certain which strategies were responsible for the schools' turnaround. "The board didn't want to jeopardize the gains made by students in ESI programs but wanted to broaden the effect of the resources so students in other schools could have an advantage, too," says Board President Gary J. Manny.

After an outside consultant suggested such strategies as reducing the extra instructional days at ESI schools and implementing a more traditional summer school program, the board asked the superintendent to recommend ways to distribute resources more evenly without jeopardizing progress. The board listened to the recommendations, engaged in heated discussions, and voted. The result was a 4-4 deadlock. The board decided to send the recommendations back to the staff for reexamination in a "noncharged environment," Manny says, rather than at a public meeting, where emotions ran high. The final recommendations identified a combination of fiscal and human resources that could be reallocated. When the board, at a subsequent meeting, voted to commit funds to support the final recommendations, the vote was unanimous.

The lesson learned: "A key to the successful resolution of an issue is talking it through, having sufficient information for a rational decision, remaining calm, and not being afraid to ask administrators to go back and readdress the issue," says Manny. "Some issues may take several proposals and several weeks of discussion, but a board must resolve to continue until consensus is reached. And, there must be a strong focus on the overall school district," not on special interests.

### THE FIRST R

The leadership team went on to tackle reading, a pressing problem. "The district was relying on a method seemingly based on divine intervention, and the children were not being successful," Tocco recalls. In 1996-97, Forth Worth's reading scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)—the state's high-stakes accountability test—were below the state average, and the achievement rate among

minority and economically disadvantaged students was unacceptably low. To restructure its reading program, the district's leaders hired a team of reading experts to recommend improvements, and board members, staff, and experts investigated and visited programs in other cities. The board committed $1 million to begin improvements and hired a director to oversee implementation of the program.

The reading initiative first focused on students in prekindergarten through second grade in 32 high-minority, low-income, low-performing elementary schools. The initiative involved research-based direct instruction requiring daily practice, immediate correction of errors, and enhancement of comprehension through vocabulary building and literature. The district bought new textbooks and invested in extensive training for principals, teachers, and instructional support team members. In addition, the district implemented a Corrective Reading program—which teaches decoding and comprehension skills in specific, structured lessons—in grades three through five in a number of elementary schools. In this pull-out program, students who need extra help with reading are taken from their classes and grouped with others of similar skill levels.

The next year, the program was expanded. The original 32 schools added third-grade students to the program, an additional 31 elementary schools added direct instruction reading in the early grades, and 62 elementary schools, 22 middle schools, and seven high schools began providing corrective reading. The results have been impressive: In 2000, 80 percent of the students in grades three, four, five, and 10 passed the reading portion of the TAAS, a significant improvement over 1999 scores. There was also a 64 percent reduction in the gap in achievement levels in reading between white and African-American sophomores between 1994 and 2000. The district is continuing to evaluate the initiative and to use data from the evaluations to guide and supplement the curriculum.

### ACHIEVEMENT FOR ALL

The leadership team is united in its quest to raise academic achievement for all its 78,000 students—46 percent of whom are Hispanic American, 31 percent African American, and 21 percent white. Of that population, 58 percent are economically disadvantaged, a figure Tocco believes is too low, since many high school students do not complete the paperwork needed for the free and reduced-price school lunch program and are therefore not counted in the total. The district has a high mobility rate (31 percent in 1998-99). Twenty-five percent of the students have limited English proficiency, and the number is rising.

The desire to raise achievement for all unites a board that, by its very make-up, might otherwise be tempted to support special interests or emphasize personal agendas. With the exception of the president, who is elected at large, the other

eight board members are elected from single-member districts. The Fort Worth board, however, concentrates on encouraging higher levels of academic achievement for everyone; closing the gap between white and minority students is a natural by-product of that continued focus, says Manny. "The terrible problem confronting our nation is that, in many ways, no one seems to have found any magic formula to achieve equivalent competencies among students," he says. "The challenge is to keep trying until satisfied....We look for areas of weakness where students are performing poorly and target new programs and initiatives to address them."

In addition to the ESI and reading initiatives, the district has implemented programs that enhance elementary and secondary school mathematics, a tutoring program that targets students who have had little success on the TAAS, an early literacy program that sends parent educators to train caregivers at registered group homes and licensed child-care centers, and a multifaceted bilingual program that the McKenzie Group—a consulting firm that undertook an intensive review of the district's initiatives—called a "national trend setter." The district also implemented a Truancy Court— part of a larger comprehensive truancy prevention program—whose goals are to support student attendance and success in the classroom and to identify and eliminate factors that prevent or discourage school attendance.

Mindful of the need to serve all students, the leadership team also established or improved programs for students with high levels of ability. A new department, Advanced Academic Services, was formed and a national expert hired to direct its efforts. Honors and Advanced Placements offerings have increased, as have the numbers of students taking high-level courses, and the district's magnet school program has been redesigned. Teachers who traditionally taught classes for gifted and talented students have been reassigned to one or two regular classes each day so that students in those classes can benefit from their expertise.

"There has been an increase in expectations for all students that extends beyond state requirements for curriculum and tests," says Tocco. "Teachers have been trained in strategies that differentiate the curriculum for various learners. All students may be using the same content or subject matter, but through the use of different techniques, different levels of depth and complexity can be addressed to meet the needs of diverse learners."

In addition to implementing an array of important new initiatives, the superintendent and the school board took the bold step of reorganizing the administrative staff to separate the functions of school operations and instruction. (The district has fewer administrators than other similar Texas districts, and spends

only 2.6 percent of its budget on administrative costs, well below the state average.) Some 30 experienced educators were moved onto instructional support teams whose purpose is to identify schools that need help in instruction and to recommend strategies to improve student performance. "The organization has worked exceedingly well, as is evidenced by the gains in achievement," says Tocco. "Generally, principals and teachers feel comfortable receiving assistance from instructional team members."

**BUILDING THE BOARD**

To help themselves stay focused on academic priorities and to improve their functioning as a team, board members receive informal mentoring and nurturing, as well as more formal training. "The informal nurturing and mentoring of new board members happens very naturally because of the frequency with which we are together. Besides being together at twice-monthly meetings, members interact with one another between meetings at community groups, conferences, conventions, and social gatherings," explains Manny. "Board members visit each other's schools and serve on ad hoc committees with each other and staff. A great deal of training is actually performed by staff members. In addition, experienced board members model behavior at meetings and make themselves available by telephone." Manny says that members meet for dinner before each board meeting to discuss issues before a vote is taken—which gives new members a chance to ask questions and to learn how similar situations have been handled in the past.

The board has also received training at NSBA conventions and at other national and state conferences and through the Texas School Boards Association, which requires all board members to participate in orientation sessions, in annual team-building sessions with the superintendent, and in discretionary continuing education. The team-building sessions "give us a chance to learn more about each other and to understand criteria used when individual board members are making decisions," Manny says. He contends, however, that no training can compensate "if board members do not have their hearts in the right place and their focus, first and foremost, on the children of the district." Manny believes that a board that works well together has the right combination of factors—personalities, leadership, mutual trust, compatible mindset, and service for the right reasons, with no hidden agendas.

Manny acknowledges that the Fort Worth board has been extremely stable: Only two new members have been elected in the last four years. "One of the board's strong suits is our longevity," he says. "The community needs to know who the superintendent is and who their board members are. We're fortunate in Fort Worth that many people know us by our first names." Tocco credits the

board for its dedication to the district, its ethical decision-making processes, and its ability to negotiate solutions and maintain harmonious relationships, even in difficult situations.

One test of the leadership team's ability to resolve a thorny issue came when citizens of Benbrook, a suburban community located with the boundaries of the FWISD, began a movement toward seceding and forming their own district. Parents were unhappy because their children had to attend a middle school outside of the community and complained that high-level coursework was not available at their home high school. The board and the Benbrook City Council appointed a citizens' committee, which was assigned the responsibility of listening to both sides and finding a solution to concerns, says Tocco. After a series of public meetings and committee reports, a common theme emerged: Benbrook citizens wanted schools that were identified with Benbrook. "Once it was determined that this did not necessarily have to mean an independent school district, compromise became possible," Tocco explains.

Ultimately, the proposed plan satisfied the community and brought benefits to the school district as well: New economic development within Benbrook increased the district's tax base, and Benbrook supported the district's $398 million school improvement bond proposal, which resulted in a new sixth-grade center for Benbrook students. The school board and the Benbrook council meet annually, and a closer working relationship has developed.

The leadership team is proud of the substantial achievement gains that district students have made—and proud that the FWISD has demonstrated that children from all backgrounds can achieve at high levels. But the team, never fully satisfied, still sees a long road ahead. "We're not at the end of our efforts," contends Tocco. "We're just at the end of the beginning. Our goal is to make the Fort Worth Independent School District the best public school district in this country. Absolutely nothing else is good enough."

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Based on its success, the Fort Worth leadership team suggests a variety of ways that boards of education and superintendents in other districts can improve their teamwork to support student achievement. Suggestions include the following:

- Keep in mind that open communication and a strong, laser-like educational focus is necessary for teamwork that fosters student achievement.
- School board members should remain abreast of important issues by being available to their constituents and to the community as a whole.

- Re-energize principals and keep them fresh and focused by reassigning them to new schools after several years. Do the same for executive staff through an administration reorganization.
- Develop a good relationship with local government and with the Chamber of Commerce. Real strength comes from collaborating on projects that help students.
- Offer a variety of opportunities to citizens interested in community service to become involved in the schools.

The efforts of the Forth Worth leadership team have resulted in higher levels of student achievement for all students and a closing of the achievement gap between white and minority students. Specific achievements include the following:

- Using recent Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) scores, the Texas Education Agency rated eight FWISD schools as "exemplary" and 24 as "recognized"—a 433 percent increase since 1994. One of the eight schools in the Elementary Schools Initiative, which targets the district's lowest-performing schools, achieved exemplary status, and three earned recognized status. (To earn the exemplary designation, a school must have 90 percent of all student groups pass all portions of the test; to be recognized, 80 percent of all students must pass the test.) An additional 32 schools are close to achieving recognized status, and 19 schools received Texas Successful Schools awards based on high levels of achievement and/or increases in student performance on the TAAS.
- Community support and confidence in the district have never been higher, as evidenced by the 1999 passage of a $398 million bond program—the largest ever in Fort Worth—by 88 percent of the voters. The bonds will be used to build schools and classrooms, to address overcrowding and critical infrastructure needs, and to enhance instructional space.
- Scholarships offered to graduating seniors continue to increase. In 2000, graduates were offered $26 million in scholarships, an increase of $15 million over 1990 amounts. The class of 2000 contained 22 National Merit Semifinalists, two National Achievement Semifinalists, and 17 National Hispanic Scholars.
- Community partnerships also continue to increase. In 2000, there are 333 adopt-a-school programs, up from 231 in 1994. All adopters are required to develop plans for the year in cooperation with their school, and each plan must link to the school's Campus Educational Improvement Plan. More than 300 companies and organizations participated in Vital Link, a national award-winning program designed to motivate students by helping them understand the connection between skills learned in class and those needed for success in

the workplace. Participating companies sponsored more than 3,000 seventh-grade students as interns.

- The number of parent volunteer hours has increased as well, from nearly 430,000 in 1991 to 465,000 in 2000. In addition, attendance at an awards dinner to honor selected teachers and students who are National Merit Semifinalists or who rank in the top 2 percent of their classes has grown dramatically. Last year, nearly 3,600 people celebrated the success of teachers and students at a RadioShack Scholars Dinner.
- Corporate support of a Chairs for Teaching Excellence program has grown. The program, which began in 1994 with one corporation funding chairs in secondary mathematics and science, now has eight additional chairs. Efforts are underway to add a Chair for Teaching Excellence in Special Education. Corporate donors and sponsors have also increased contributions to picnics and other events, such as an Outstanding Teacher Recognition Dinner, that honor teachers.

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CHAPTER XV

# KENNEWICK SCHOOL DISTRICT KENNEWICK, WASHINGTON

Located in southeastern Washington near the Oregon border, the Kennewick School District is in the midst of an expanding agricultural region known for a long, productive growing season and frost-free winters. In addition to agriculture, Kennewick—a Native American name for "winter heaven"—has a variety of large and small businesses and a high-technology sector related to the federal government's Hanford Nuclear Reservation. Despite the area's diversified economy, the school district has substantial needs. A third of its students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. The district has an annual transient rate of 25 percent, and over a five-year period, 46 percent of its students have moved at least once. The Hispanic population, now at 18 percent, is rapidly growing, and the majority of Hispanic students speak only Spanish.

In the mid-1990s, the leaders of the Kennewick school district recognized that their students were not well prepared for the future. Too many elementary school students were reading below grade level, and too many middle school students were cruising through school, often failing several courses or doing the minimum amount of work. Superintendent Paul Rosier and the Kennewick school board wanted to home in on academic improvement—and to mobilize the school district to prepare students to succeed in a fast-changing world.

### FOCUS ON READING

They knew that reading was the gateway skill, the one that would open the doors to life-long learning. Students who read poorly have little chance of success, especially as course content becomes more difficult. Observing that the majority of students who leave third grade reading below grade level never catch up, the school board and superintendent made early literacy the keystone of their approach. The district made a single-minded and passionate commitment to one goal: that 90 percent of its students would read at or above grade level by the end of their third-grade year. The 90 percent goal "was a very, very challenging goal for the average American school district," Rosier told the *American School Board Journal*, which gave Kennewick's reading program a Magna Award in 1997. "People's initial reaction was that the goal may not be possible, but the board wanted to give the district three years to try to meet it."

In fact, the literacy goal helped turned the superintendent and school board—a diverse group whose perspectives ranged from very conservative to very liberal—into a cohesive team. Having a clear academic focus moved the board away from any tendency to micromanage, allowed board members to work together successfully, and led to a strong and trusting relationship between the board and superintendent.

The leadership team had identified reading as a top priority through a strategic planning process that involved more than 2,000 people from the community, staff, and administration. The plan became the foundation of the teamwork culture that characterizes the Kennewick School District. The superintendent and board members have been directly involved in developing, implementing, and updating the plan, which sets the focus and direction of the district. Each year for the past seven years, the board has unanimously supported the plan—one that gives administrators and staff the latitude and responsibility they need to determine the most effective strategies and methods to meet their goals.

After deciding to make early literacy a top priority, the school board and superintendent created an action plan, later described in *The 90% Reading Goal*, which Rosier coauthored with Lynn Fielding, a school board member, and Nancy Kerr, one of the founders of The Reading Foundation, a not-for-profit corporation that supports the school system's goal by encouraging parents to read to their children 20 minutes each day. The book has received national publicity and spawned similar reading programs in several other school districts. In the book, the Kennewick leadership team explains how the district established policies, developed assessments, conducted staff training, and allocated resources. For example, in the plan's second year, the board took the bold step of dedicating $500,000 annually toward the district's reading goal, allocating the money toward a variety of reading initiatives in individual schools and toward district-wide training in the fundamentals of literacy.

Over the past six years, Rosier says, the district has established a strong K-3 assessment system to provide teachers with data to adjust instructional strategies and to give parents annual reports on their children's progress. The district provides an in-depth staff development program for all elementary teachers in reading instruction. Schools make decisions on specific instructional strategies and materials. Working in teams, teachers make essential decisions as to how to structure the day and use the resources that each building has, says Rosier.

"The elementary buildings have self-selected reading programs that they feel will benefit their students the most," adds School Board President Dan T. Mildon. "The self-selection process and any training associated with that selection are important elements in providing encouragement and motivation to the teaching staff in their teaching duties." All schools have increased the time students spend in literacy instruction, and some have reduced time spent in science and social studies instruction, a choice they are permitted to make. "The non-negotiables are the goal, the standard, the assessment system, and annual progress reports to the school board and public," Rosier says.

## ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Academic standards, assessment, and accountability continue to be the heart of the district's strategic plan. The district's complex assessment system provides a great deal of useful information regularly. This assessment system begins in kindergarten, with district-designed pre- and post-tests that are based on the work of the National Research Council. "Implementing this instrument has significantly changed the focus of our kindergarten curriculum from social development to reading readiness," says Rosier.

The district uses the Developmental Reading Assessment in first and second grade and the Northwest Evaluation Association Levels test to measure growth in reading and mathematics from grades three through 10. One advantage to the "levels" test is that a district can draw from banks of test items to create an evaluation that meets specific goals. "Teachers participate directly in this process and have much more ownership in the test than in most standardized tests," says Rosier. In addition to its own tests assessing progress in reading, mathematics, and science concepts and processes, the district uses two tests required by the state—the Iowa Test of Basic Skills at grades three, six, and nine, and the Washington Assessment of Student Learning at grades four, seven, and 10. "The new statewide standards and testing program require our students be better educated than ever before," Rosier told parents in a message on the district's Web site. "We have adopted a goal to have at least 85 percent of our high school students pass the state test by the time it is required for graduation on the year 2008."

Parents receive an annual individual student report on the progress their children are making. Each school provides an annual progress report to parents and the public as well, and the district provides an annual summative report to the public and parents, which the local newspaper publishes and distributes. To assess how it is improving as a district, every two years Kennewick uses a survey, Harris Interactive, designed to measure the "customer satisfaction" of students in grades four-12 and of teachers, other staff, and parents. Each building receives a report specifically based on the data from that school, and the district receives a comprehensive report. Since the first survey was taken in 1997, the district has consistently improved its ratings among its clients.

With the reading program underway, the leadership team tackled another important issue—the social promotion of middle school students. In 1995, the school board directed administrators to develop middle school accountability and promotion standards, after middle school teachers had voiced concerns about promoting students who suffered no consequences for failing to do their work, and high school teachers had asked why so many middle school students were entering

high school poorly prepared. The policy requires students to meet academic, attendance, and discipline standards to be promoted. Each student who does not meet the standards receives an Academic Improvement Plan and is given the chance to attend summer school. Students who pass summer school are promoted to the next grade. Students who do not attend, or do not pass summer school, are retained. During the past five years, more than 1,900 of the 2,500 middle school students who did not initially meet standards were able to make the academic progress necessary to be promoted. The district's middle school accountability plan was the Grand Prize winner of the *American School Board Journal's* 1998 Magna Awards for excellence. Rosier credited the school board with the vision to move forward with a strong policy.

### STAYING FOCUSED

To make certain the district remains committed to academic achievement, the school board has taken a number of steps—from holding semi-annual retreats to conducting annual workshops at each school to implementing an Administrative Team Performance Pay Program. These programs keep the district clearly focused on the strategic plan.

For the twice-yearly retreats, all board members review an agenda that is prepared several weeks in advance, says Mildon. Sometimes the review process will identify an important issue that is added to the agenda, he says, and there is always adequate time to cover issues that surface during discussions. Honest exchanges about the district's strengths and weaknesses allow the board to move forward. "Board members have enough respect for each other's professionalism and modeled behavior that, despite our diverse points of view and philosophies, we do not seem to have significant disagreements," he adds. "Everyone is willing to hear each other out and potentially learn something new or gain a different perspective. Ultimately, we come down to the touchstone issue—how an item affects student learning. This provides a common ground that ultimately normalizes the discussion and eliminates any potential rancor."

School board members have also become directly engaged in supporting the strategic plan by working with individual schools. Annually, the board members assign themselves four or five schools, where their role is to support principals, staff members, and parents. They also conduct annual public workshops at which each school's staff reports on progress toward fulfilling the goals of the strategic plan.

The public workshops are primarily focused on academic goals, implementation, progress, and achievement, explains Mildon. Reports on all phases of school

performance—from discipline to diversity—are expected. A basic agenda, focused on academics, is provided to all principals, so they have time to prepare presentations. "The board is interested in understanding how the board's goals and policies are being implemented, what progress is being made, and what difficulties are being encountered," he says. "This helps the board understand where critical district resources are best utilized for the greatest impact in achieving district goals."

Although they often spend as many as 30 hours a week in board-related business during the school year, Mildon says board members voice no complaints. "Our parents gave of their own time in service to neighbors and community, and in times of war they risked their very lives in defense of our way of life," he says. "It is little to ask of us to spend a few or many hours serving our community."

### PERFORMANCE PAY AND COLLABORATIVE BARGAINING

To encourage teamwork and to increase the administration's attention and focus on the key goals of the district, the board developed an Administrative Team Performance Pay Program with three levels of pay. The board and superintendent develop a set of objectives, based on the strategic plan, for which the superintendent is directly responsible. Each quarter, the board reviews the superintendent's performance and awards up to a maximum of one-quarter of the total performance pool, based on 16 percent of the superintendent's base salary. Similarly, the board established a performance pay pool for the superintendent's cabinet, equivalent to 11 percent of the total salaries of the six members; each is eligible for an equal dollar share of the pool. To earn the money, the team and the board agree on a set of objectives, tasks, and measurements based on the district's strategic plan. The team provides progress reports each quarter, and the board awards performance pay twice a year—with a total possible annual share of $8,000 per person.

Principals and assistant principals at the secondary school level are also eligible for performance pay, which is based on meeting agreed-on district and building goals. Elementary school principals are placed on two teams, depending on the reading strategy used in their buildings. With their supervisor, they establish one team goal and one individual goal for performance pay; they are evaluated twice a year. The total value of the performance pay is 6.5 percent of the salary of each person. All team members are paid at the same percentage rate based on the evaluation of a particular team.

"It was the intention of the board to apply some of the best practices from private industry in a positive, proactive manner," says Mildon, explaining why the board adopted the plan. While recognizing that many objectives and services cannot be "dollar denominated," performance pay can be a positive motivator in

many areas, The program has led to significant improvements in the safety and achievement of the district's students, he says.

As the district developed a strong academic focus, it also saw improvements in its relationship with the teachers union. In 1993, the teachers union had conducted a strike, and the relationship was confrontational, Rosier recalls. Over the past seven years, the district has moved to a collaborative bargaining approach—using "interest-based bargaining" that focuses on each side's interests rather than its positions. "We try to solve problems together," he says. "In fact, we use the interest-based strategies as methods to solve labor-management problems as they arise during the year."

As one example of collaboration, the school district and the Kennewick Education Association developed a Peer Assistance and Review Program and have implemented the first phase, designed to assist beginning and new teachers to become successful. Two of the district's "master teachers" work full time as mentors to ensure that new teachers have a good first year, that they remain in the teaching profession, and that they stay in Kennewick. "The other side of the program is to help those few new teachers who are not successful to find new careers," Rosier says.

Kennewick's academic progress has earned the district several important grants. In 2000, for example, the Battelle Pacific Northwest Laboratory awarded Kennewick a $250,000 five-year grant to establish a science materials and teacher-training center to support inquiry-based science instruction in grades K-8. A component of the training program is the integration of reading instruction into the science curriculum.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation selected Kennewick as one of 10 model school districts in the state of Washington and awarded it $7.3 million over the next five years to "reinvent education" and to fulfill its strategic plan. In making the award, Tom Vander Ark, executive director of the foundation's Education Initiative, said, "Kennewick has shown a district-wide dedication to improving education for all students. Washington's education system relies on such districts to continue improving our schools. We at the Foundation are excited to recognize and work with those districts sharing our commitment to helping all students achieve."

As Rosier sees it, the primary purpose of the grant is to significantly increase the academic performance of all students to meet the standards established by the district and the state. "We are now operating in a standards-based environment where high standards have been established and educators have no experience in getting all or most students to these high standards," he says. Using the district's

strategic plan as a guide, each school is developing a reinvention plan to help students reach high standards. The elementary schools will continue their focus on early literacy, Rosier says. The middle schools and high schools are developing plans that include literacy and the creation of small learning communities and methods to personalize relationships. The changes will enrich the school experience and increase academic achievement in a district where continuous improvement is a way of life.

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Based on its experience, the Kennewick leadership team offers the following advice to other districts:

- Boards and superintendents must develop a shared vision and must focus on where the district should be headed. Both parties must make sure that the focus is on academics and student learning.
- The leadership team should set goals and measure progress in achieving them. A definitive assessment system must measure progress at each grade level, beginning in kindergarten and continuing at least through 10th grade.
- Communication among the board members and the superintendent must take place regularly.
- Finally, parents and the community must be kept informed of progress that is made in achieving the goals of the strategic plan.

The Kennewick School District has made substantial progress in improving literacy and in other areas:

- The emphasis on early literacy has paid dividends. Although Kennewick has not yet reached its goal of 90 percent of all third-graders reading on or above grade level, the district has made substantial progress. In spring 2000, 77 percent of all enrolled third-graders met or exceeded the standard, compared with 58 percent of students in 1995.
- In seven of the district's 13 elementary schools, 80 percent or more third-graders met the goal. Washington Elementary School set a new individual school record for the district, with 94 percent of third-graders meeting the district reading standard.
- The results of the district's fourth-grade students on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning reading performance test are evidence of the effectiveness of the district's focus on literacy. In 2000, 69 percent of Kennewick students met or exceeded state standards, compared with 57 percent in 1998.

- During the past five years, some 2,500 middle school students were told they were not meeting standards and were given an academic improvement plan. More than 1,900 were able to make the academic progress necessary to meet the standards and were promoted.

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CHAPTER XVI

# Minneapolis Public Schools Minneapolis, Minnesota

Aptly named "city of water," Minneapolis is a center of finance, industry, and transportation in the Midwestern United States. With 18 lakes, it offers a host of opportunities to swim and sail in the summer and ice skate or ice fish in the winter. More than 30 theaters, as well as two world-class art museums and an orchestra, provide residents with ample cultural opportunities as well.

Although they live in an area rich in natural beauty and resources, the majority of the 49,000 students who attend the Minneapolis Public Schools are poor. The overall poverty rate has more than doubled in the past 20 years, from 31 percent to 65 percent. Drawing an influx of immigrants, the Minneapolis school system is the most diverse in the state, with students speaking more than 80 different languages. Today, one in five speak a language other than English—compared with one in 12 in 1988. Special education students, many with severe and multiple disabilities, make up about 14 percent of the school population, and because state and federal funds do not fully cover the costs of services mandated by law, the district spends about $30 million on special education each year. Mobility rates, exacerbated by a lack of affordable housing, rose from 40 percent in 1980 to 46 percent in 2000. Recently, several major companies downsized their workforces or were sold or merged with other companies not headquartered in Minneapolis—a situation that might impede corporations' ability to support the education of the city's children.

Facing serious challenges, the Minneapolis school board determined to change its culture and improve its operations so that it could focus more intensely on raising academic achievement. In 1993, the board began to shift away from micromanagement and worked hard to develop a strategic direction, with a vision, mission, beliefs, goals and strategies. In 1997, the board hired Carol Johnson, a Minneapolis teacher, principal, and administrator who had served as superintendent of the suburban St. Louis Park, Minnesota, public schools. Determined to work as a team and to commit to excellence, in 1998 the board approved a detailed District Improvement Agenda (DIA) that was developed with input from staff and a wide variety of community stakeholders. The DIA, which is reviewed and updated semiannually, outlines major goals, objectives, indicators of progress, and responsibilities for the district as a whole, as well as for schools, teachers, students, parents, and the community.

## THE POLICY GOVERNANCE APPROACH

As the board intensified its shift toward working more productively and professionally, its members realized they needed training in communications, teamwork, and goal development. In addition to attending training sessions and board retreats, board members participated in a Meyers-Briggs assessment to help them

determine the differences in the way they approach their tasks as individuals and as a board. The most influential training was a workshop called Exploring Board Governance, led by staff from the Illinois School Boards Association and based on the nationally known Carver model of governance. After that workshop, the board began to monitor its own performance at meetings and to use a checklist to determine the next steps in policy development. The board also quickly developed a document, Governing for the Future, that clearly delineates board processes, board/staff relationships, and ways to achieve district goals within the constraints of limited means.

"Using policy governance as a framework, we've agreed that the work of our board is to define the goals or 'ends' of our organization—that is, what benefits are we providing, for whom, and at what cost," says Board Chair Catherine Shreves. "This concentration on 'ends' keeps us very focused on the big picture, rather than allowing us to be mired in detail. This is important when the board is part time, the organization has a $600 million plus annual budget, and we have terrific staff working for us."

Board members also agreed that the board as a whole—rather than individual members—must define the goals of the organization and monitor their implementation. "In other words," says Shreves, "the board speaks in one voice or not at all."

The board also established a Decision Calendar that helps streamline discussion and monitor the superintendent's progress in meeting mutually agreed-on goals. At the beginning of the year, the board chair and the assistant to the superintendent create the Board Decision Calendar by reviewing the annual operating cycle of the school district and comparing it to established goals. "Because of the front-end effort, we've been able to stick with the outlined schedule, although it has required a bit of discipline," acknowledges Shreves. "I would say that fewer crises have derailed our calendar, because we have anticipated and planned for problems, such as the lack of an increase in legislative funding for our district. That doesn't mean that the crises are easy—just that they are planned for." The assistant to the superintendent also plans the agenda for the Roundtable (the administrative planning and implementation team) to ensure that its presentations to the board are aligned with the Decision Calendar.

Finally, the board resolved to act as a trustee for the community and to actively seek input on policy issues. In addition to conducting forums that seek residents' views on policy issues, the board solicits input from Area Parent Advisory Committees, citywide student government, and other advisory committees and

groups. "We also post policy questions on the district's Web site, where people unable to attend the meetings can provide input," says Shreves.

### A Framework for Accountability

As the school board and superintendent more clearly defined their roles and responsibilities and forged a stronger relationship, they also developed a "seamless framework" for accountability that is based on the idea of continuous improvement at every level of the school system. The strategic direction establishes the district's vision and overall goals, while the DIA sets shorter-term objectives related to main goals. Each school aligns its goals with the district's and uses a "quality improvement" process of monitoring and evaluation, planning, and implementation. Each school prepares an annual school improvement plan, which is based on an information report that details demographic and achievement data, as well as customer and staff satisfaction data. Schools that surpass their own continuous improvement goals are eligible for financial awards; funding comes from legislative grants the district must earn by meeting its own improvement goals.

The leadership team's quality improvement process involves teachers, principals, and other staff in Professional Development Planning (PDP)—an annual process designed to raise the quality of instruction and leadership in the district for both teachers and administrators. The process encourages collegial planning, assessment, analyses, and reflection through structured self- and peer reviews, according to Johnson. Each educator has a team of peers who provide ongoing support and guidance—including mentoring for all new teachers—to build the educator's capacity to engage in best practices.

A peer-based intervention and support system addresses a range of performance issues, allowing teachers, when necessary, to leave the Minneapolis Public Schools fairly and without contention. "Although there is ongoing discussion about how to implement the process most effectively and consistently," Johnson says, "PDP has not been a source of conflict between labor and management in the district because it was developed through collaborative discussion among all stakeholders."

### Academic Reforms

In the area of academic standards, the board and superintendent have worked to keep on course while dealing with a changing landscape at the state level. During Johnson's tenure as the district's director of curriculum and instruction, Minneapolis developed its own content standards and grade-level expectations in 10 subject areas. At the same time, the state developed graduation standards, which include statewide basic skills tests in reading, writing, and mathematics that students must pass to graduate. As the state delayed and sometimes reversed its

course, the district maintained its commitment to district standards, insisting that they align with or exceed any state standards. The board has consistently provided resources to support the development of standards and standards-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The leadership team has invested many of its resources in class-size reductions, particularly at the K-3 level—a strategy supported by voters, who resoundingly approved a November 2000 levy to maintain small classes. The team realized, however, that improvements at the elementary level needed to be supported by changes in middle schools and high schools. In May 1998 the board made middle-school reform a top priority by endorsing a "middle grades platform" that emphasized five areas: small-scale learning environments, standards and staff development, family and community involvement, positive behavior management, and attendance.

The Minneapolis League of Women Voters also supported the initiative. Using grant funds, the League conducted two studies in which researchers "shadowed" middle-grade students and educators for a day. The most recent study, conducted in March 2000, reported good progress on the district's reform efforts, noting that instructional techniques such as block scheduling and team teaching were in effect at most schools and that teachers in almost every middle school were using "advisory periods" to connect with students on a more personal level.

"They've come a long way in two years," said Peggy Pluimer, cochairman of the League's education committee, in an article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. "They've jumped on the bandwagon and they've been working really hard." Areas that the League study said could use improvement—such as staff development, family involvement, and student behavior—are on the agenda for the next phase of the middle-school reform effort.

The district's leaders also teamed with other education partners to get a clear picture of the school system's overall progress in raising academic achievement. In February 2000, the Minneapolis Public Schools, along with the Minneapolis Foundation, the Greater Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce, and with assistance from the University of Minnesota's Office of Educational Accountability, released *Measuring Up: A Report on the Minneapolis Public Schools*. The report "illustrated that while many of our school and students are experiencing academic success, far too many of our African American, Native American, and Hispanic students are not on track to graduate from high school," says Johnson. "The gap in achievement between students of color and their white peers was significant. These figures alarmed not only us, but our community as well."

Following publication of the report, the leadership team instituted its Twelve-Point Plan for Improving the Academic Performance and Graduation Rates of Students of Color, which Johnson calls "our attempt to bring the district and community together in a more focused and intentional effort toward accelerating academic achievement." The plan lays the groundwork for long-term, systemic, community changes and requires the engagement of all stakeholders. The strategies detailed in the plan include better use of student data to direct action; greater emphasis on quality teaching and professional development; targeting resources to needy schools; and restructuring high schools to improve graduation rates and prepare students for the transition to postsecondary education.

"We have already had great success in engaging the community to support the plan, raising awareness about the link between attendance and achievement, and reducing the over-referral of students of color to special education services—another goal of The Twelve Point Plan," says Johnson. "Many community groups and the faith community have stepped forward to work with us to tackle this challenge."

### Community Involvement

Engaging the community is, in fact, an important part of the leadership team's philosophy. In addition to involving the community as partners in developing the DIA and in many other areas, the board and superintendent have held two large and several smaller "community conversations" that have included representatives from all stakeholder groups. The dialogues were designed to engage the community in achieving the district's main goals—accelerating student achievement, developing mutual trust and involvement, and helping everyone realize the need for partnership. One citywide conversation focused on the need to support the development of "positive assets" in students; the second focused on behavior and attendance policies.

Superintendent Johnson has "credibility with every segment of our community" notes Shreves. "She spends a great deal of time listening, advocating, and developing partnerships with business, community foundations, faith communities, other metropolitan school districts, government agencies, and students leaders that support the education of our students."

As part of its meetings, the school board has conducted policy forums on specific issues. "So far, we have had three forums, one on site-based decision making, another on exclusive advertising/vending contracts, and the most recent one on our high school reform efforts," says Shreves. "The forums have been well attended, with more than 100 attendees at the site-based decision making and

high school reform sessions, where more than 25 speakers offered their ideas on high school issues and others offered written feedback on forms provided."

With the community's views in mind, the leadership team is undertaking a focused high school reform effort that aligns with the DIA and the Twelve-Point Plan and builds on the middle school reform effort. The plans call for radically changing high schools by creating a variety of small learning communities in each high school that will challenge the high achievers and also find ways to connect with kids who haven't engaged in the past. A foundation is providing a $1 million grant to support the development of small learning communities—a concept identified by research as essential to improving outcomes, says Johnson. Key representatives of school staff, students, and parents have formed a High School Council to develop a plan to improve the high school experience and increase academic results. In addition, the Minneapolis Public Schools Foundation secured the pro bono services of a well-known consulting firm to help the district develop an implementation plan that ensures small learning communities for every ninth-grader by fall 2002. "This is an effort that also involves a careful review of our systems and their ability to sustain comprehensive reform," says Johnson.

Because their school district has a population with great needs, board members and the superintendent often meet with the city's legislative delegation, target key legislators, and testify at selected hearings. "We visit with state officials and the governor to explain our agenda and our district's unique needs. Our lobbying efforts are ongoing, in that both the board and I are always cognizant of the need to advocate and campaign for our schools in any arena in which we are speaking and engaging the community," Johnson says.

Despite opinion polls suggesting that citizens want to invest in education, however, Johnson says there is significant legislative support for tax breaks rather than for using the state's budget surplus to support education. Meanwhile, the school district's costs for utilities, transportation, health benefits, and wages are rapidly rising, and the district must subsidize special education services out of its general fund. After facing a $30 million shortfall in the 2001-2002 school year, the district is undergoing a painful budget-cutting process—one that will lead to the termination of more than 75 district department positions and 250 probationary teachers.

Despite the financial challenges it faces, the leadership team intends to keep the school district focused on constructive changes that will improve academic achievement for all students. "A consensus on key values, sound communication, and a growing integration of the Carver model that more clearly delineates policy and administration help us work together, building a strong and productive part-

nership," says Johnson. "Staying focused on our District Improvement Agenda goals and results also helps us stay the course—and avoid the wrangling over what is important and to whom that plagues some board/superintendent relationships."

### Advice and Achievements

The board and superintendent of the Minneapolis Public Schools offer the following advice to other districts that would like to improve their ability to function as a team:

- Focus on results related to the primary purpose: educating all students. Avoid peripheral issues that take the focus away from the primary mission.
- Use data to drive decision making.
- Engage the community as a partner in education.
- Build a strong relationship of trust between the school board and the superintendent.

The leadership team of the Minneapolis Public Schools has seen its efforts result in positive changes in many areas of school life. Achievements include the following:

- Overall scores on the reading and mathematics sections of the 2000 Minnesota Basic Standards Tests have showed gains for four straight years. The number of students passing the reading test increased from 48 percent in 1999 to 56 percent in 2000; the number passing math rose from 42 percent to 44 percent. Almost all racial and ethnic groups made gains, as did special education students and English Language Learners.
- In a November 2000 referendum, voters overwhelmingly approved an increase in the school levy to keep classes small and to pay for early childhood education programs. The levy will raise $42 million in its first year (2002, when the present levy runs out) and will run for eight years, rising to about $52 million in 2010. This is the third time voters have approved the levy since 1990, and each time, levels of support have grown. In the most recent levy, voter support rose by 3 percent, to a 73 percent approval rate. Although 82 percent of Minneapolis residents do not have children in the public schools, citizens recognize the district's commitment to increasing achievement.
- The school district raised $3.2 million to match an Annenberg Foundation grant for an Arts for Academic Achievement Program to integrate the arts into the school system's curriculum. Business partners and vendors also provided strong support for the district's "Expect Great Things" image campaign and offered unprecedented support for the referendum renewal campaign, in which initial fund-raising goals were surpassed by a wide margin.
- In addition, the community has contributed millions of dollars in scholarships for Minneapolis Public Schools graduates. Alumni wanting to give something

back to the district have established ground-breaking programs, including one that provides $10 million in scholarships over four years. These programs offer hope to urban students that a college education can be a real option for them.

- Through the Youth Trust, a collaboration of the district and the community, more than 100 alliances that benefit children and youth have been developed.

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CHAPTER XVII

# Monroe Township Public Schools Williamstown, New Jersey

Located 30 minutes east of Philadelphia, in one of New Jersey's fastest-growing areas, the Monroe Township Public Schools were experiencing a great deal of change in the mid 1990s—change that brought growth and diversity. First settled in 1737, the township had an urban center as well as farms and a tomato processing plant. Increasing numbers of tract and suburban houses, built to support workers commuting to metropolitan Philadelphia, existed side-by-side with low-income housing and apartment complexes.

Financial problems plagued the school system. Ranked in the bottom socioeconomic quartile of the state, the 5,000-student district was spending less money per pupil than any other district in its size category. Unable to get its budgets passed and facing state-imposed spending caps and substantial construction delays that impeded the building of a new high school, the district saw educational progress grind to a halt. When the long-term superintendent of schools retired midway through the 1995-96 school year, the citizens expressed their strong displeasure with the status quo by voting three school board members out of office.

In the end, however, the crisis propelled the district into a new era—one marked by a clear focus on student achievement and a planning and decision-making process that has resulted in positive change. In collaboration with its new superintendent, Charles Ivory, an energized board and community opened their minds to new ideas and initiatives for school improvement. Citizens soon showed their support by passing two consecutive budgets and by becoming active participants in the district's extensive decision-making process.

"Most important, we have been able to come together as a community with a sense of common vision and mission," says Ivory, who previously worked as a school administrator in four districts and in the New Jersey Department of Education. "A cultural shift pervades our community in our perception of student capacity for academic achievement as well as the ability of our school and community partnership to meet this challenge. Most impressive has been the level to which students have risen to the challenge of achievement."

### Working as a Team

From the start, the leadership made it clear that the district would operate as an education team that emphasized collaborative planning and consensus-building. The key was to encourage school district staff, families, students, and the greater community to commit energy and intellect to school improvement. To involve the community, the leadership team put certain structures into place—a District Advisory Council (DAC), school-site councils, a District-Level Coordinating Committee, and active parent organizations in all schools. Teachers, administrators, board of education members, parents, and students became actively involved

in all these venues. By developing an expectation that community involvement is valued—and by institutionalizing the mechanisms to guarantee ongoing involvement—the school board and superintendent have supported the development of a culture that says, "Teamwork is the way we do business."

"In Monroe Township we have great diversity among our members but have developed a team that functions very successfully within the framework of a consensus-building model," says Ivory. "Our business decisions are almost always unanimous. This is because we take great pride in communication and negotiation to clarify and respond to member questions and concerns before drawing conclusion to issues. There are very few real emergencies. If we have done our homework, there is seldom disagreement on what is the most appropriate decision—if we have taken the needed time to bring everyone along. When there are concerns, our focus shifts to understanding the information needs of members so that we can continue consideration of the issue."

With the assistance of the New Jersey Schools Boards Association, the Monroe Township board focused on setting goals for each school year, giving special attention to the unfinished work of the previous year. In spring 2000, the district developed and adopted its first long-range strategic plan with the participation of all its constituencies. The goals of the strategic plan—a plan that must be formally reconsidered every third year—are closely tied to the goals the board sets annually.

### STANDARDS AND PROBLEM SOLVING

To strengthen its academic programs, the district reduced class size and created 50 more teaching positions, hired its first technology coordinator, hired its first guidance staff at the elementary school level, and increased its Advanced Placement course offerings to 13. The staff also worked diligently to ensure alignment of the instructional curriculum with standards set by New Jersey and by national organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Eight districtwide standing curriculum committees meet regularly during the school day and after school hours.

The leadership team challenged the school system to go beyond the standards and to develop an instructional delivery system to teach the skills and content of the standards in the most effective ways. Resulting school improvement initiatives include an Academy for the Engineering Sciences at Williamstown High School, a partnership with the University of Pennsylvania Literacy Network, and a Professional Development District partnership with Rowan University.

The leadership team concentrated on means as well as ends, putting a premium on problem-solving strategies that address all issues coming from every

level of the school district. The district employs Total Quality Management (TQM)—a strategic, integrated management system that involves stakeholders in continually improving the school system's processes and operations. "Our improvement model provides the ability to make regular adjustments as we move forward," explains Ivory. Continual dialogue across the school district—especially with board members serving on the school-site councils—allows an opportunity for what Ivory calls "incremental redirection." The redirection almost goes unnoticed because "it becomes our status quo," he says.

District leaders focus on solving the problem, rather than focusing on the people bringing the problem forward. In spring 2000, the district added a new mechanism to address issues and resolve any roadblocks: a District-Level Coordinating Committee, which reviews issues that affect more than one school. The committee supports the work of the school-site councils by providing ongoing dialogue about the best ways to implement improvement strategies and aids communication between school and district leadership.

By following what has become a school district model of developing consensus on the best solutions, the district has been able to resolve seemingly irreconcilable differences. "We implement TQM problem-solving strategies," says Ivory. "Meeting management plays a significant role in how we process information and problems. It is not unusual for me to be in front of a group—small or large, board members, administrators, staff, community members, students, or a combination of these groups—with chart paper and markers. In these settings, we use TQM to gather information, sift, sort, and reorganize the information, identify problems, and move forward. We brainstorm ideas for action plans to solve problems and report out to the larger group. We agree on next steps, and we always follow through. Our school community is becoming accustomed to these planning and problem-solving strategies. School-site councils follow the same operating agenda."

For example, Ivory says, the district used this model to identify concerns following the 1997 opening of its new and much larger high school. Growing student enrollments, staffing needs, an expanding curriculum, and feelings of loss of control were becoming overwhelming, he says. The faculty worked together to describe needs, concerns, and issues. After faculty members identified the areas that they could control, they developed and implemented action plans and evaluated them for effectiveness.

### Working Collaboratively

The district's school board members have learned to work effectively in a collaborative environment, in part by making a commitment to education and training. Board members are expected to attend county and state meetings and conferences

regularly and to participate in the National School Boards Association's annual conference. "These programs have been particularly important in their affirmation of the curricular and other decisions we have been making to move forward our agenda of school improvement," says Board President Allison J. Munch. "Board members often return sharing how proud they were, even as novice members, to be able to share with members of other communities the high quality of cooperation and support they receive from each other and from the administration."

Monroe Township's board members like to say they are the most educated board members around. Beyond attending workshops and meetings, they read the news clipping and professional journals that Ivory circulates to keep informed about current initiatives and future trends. The superintendent's "one-pagers" provide executive summaries of issues that might become the focus of discussion and the basis for challenges to staff and community.

Additionally, the board now undertakes an annual self-evaluation, using a needs assessment survey recommended by the New Jersey School Boards Association. The board conducts this review at the same time that it evaluates the superintendent's progress in meeting goals. "In this way we are reviewing the larger picture of how the team is progressing in meeting the objectives we had set for ourselves," says Munch. The board is able to tackle major improvement initiatives because the objectives allow it to focus on larger ideas and on the incremental steps necessary to meet the objectives, she says. Objectives have ranged from determining the best structure for board committee recommendations to analyzing the diversity needs of school programs to expanding summer enrichment programs. The self-evaluation helps bring forward problems that might not otherwise surface, says Munch.

The board president's leadership abilities are vital to ensuring a process geared to solving problems, district leaders say. The president is expected to have a commitment to inclusivity and a loyalty to the process and the team. During transitions between presidents, the past president is expected to offer support to the new leader. In fact, several former board presidents serve on the current board; their assistance in providing facts and historical perspective is invaluable, says Munch. "Our board presidents have been particularly skilled in their ability to facilitate meetings, remaining independent in their leadership," she adds.

### VISIBILITY AND COMMUNICATION

Board members choose to be visible and active—keys to developing teamwork, they contend. They are actively engaged not only in school-site councils but also on project management teams, task forces, and subcommittees. Their style of active leadership invites representatives of other constituencies to increase their

participation in the work of the school district. Board members also play important roles in community affairs, which gives them opportunities to talk with residents and hear their concerns and criticisms. By coaching youth athletic teams, singing in a church choir, or serving in leadership positions in school-level organizations, for example, board members are able to provide regular feedback concerning the community's perceptions of the schools.

To build trust and foster better communication, board members occasionally socialize, but they have a clear idea of where to draw the line. The board has a winter holiday dinner each year, and the superintendent also holds an annual social gathering in his home that brings board members and administrators together. These times are "special," says Munch, because they allow people to connect not just on business but around families. "We are a very diverse group. We bring substantially different backgrounds to the table. Our personal and 'other' agendas are brought with us. To have nurtured a respect for the value of these differences has brought even greater strength to our outcomes, because we work hard to develop consensus."

"This board is a 'dream' because the members represent a balance of independence and group allegiance," says Ivory. "By no stretch of the imagination do our members rubber stamp my recommendations. We work hard as central office administration, board committee chairs, and board officers to process debate toward consensus; we have created a culture where nothing less is acceptable."

Despite its successes and community support, the school district continues to face money problems. "Our greatest financial challenge is that the calamity of low spending, state-imposed caps on spending, and increasing enrollment are making it very difficult to balance growth spending needs with program improvement, such as technology," Ivory says. Monroe Township spends the least ($6,885) per pupil of any of the nine K-12 districts in Gloucester County, where the school system is located. "To be competitive with average per-pupil spending in the county—$8,071—we would need to increase spending by $6 million," says Ivory. So the leadership team stretches district dollars as far as possible, he adds, while "maintaining high expectations under all circumstances and conveying with great regularity to staff and students our *absolute* commitment to excellence."

The team also celebrates successes with "celebration memos" that highlight for the entire school district the accomplishments of students and staff and with banners—in the streets, on store fronts, in the schools, and along the entrance to the new high school—that tout the district's academic achievements. Soon, says Ivory, an "SAT Hall of Fame" will join the existing "Achievement Hall of Fame" to communicate the message of "our capacity to reach for higher levels of excellence."

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Based on their experiences, the superintendent and school board suggest a few basic principles that could apply to other districts looking to improve their teamwork in support of academic achievement:

- Display simple human respect for colleagues and respect what is truly best for the children of the school district.
- Adhere to a process that allows consensus building. Give dissenting members an opportunity to present their case and, at the same time, give them all the information necessary to understand the majority view.
- Conduct meetings professionally by keeping the issue—not the person presenting it—at the forefront.

The Monroe Township Public Schools have displayed a variety of academic and other accomplishments since 1997:

- The district's average SAT scores have increased by 20 points over the last two years—the "best example of all the elements of a school district working together," says the leadership team.
- The community passed two consecutive budgets for the first time in 30 years.
- In September 1999 the district opened its academically challenging Academy for the Engineering Sciences at Williamstown High School and is expected to open an Academy for the Visual and Performing Arts in September 2002.
- Williamstown High School was ranked fifth of 53 tricounty high schools in the New Jersey state testing program, Class of 2000. In spring 2000 the school was ranked fourth of 200 public and private high schools for the academic achievement of student athletes.
- The district saw outstanding achievement in Advanced Placement test results, with 100 percent of the AP calculus students passing the test.

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CHAPTER XVIII

# Newport News Public Schools Newport News, Virginia

In this southeast Virginia school district, located along Hampton Roads Harbor where the James River meets the Chesapeake Bay, the echoes of history are everywhere. The most famous naval battle of the Civil War was fought near the shores of Newport News, and artifacts from the two ironclad warships that battled each other at sea are on display at a maritime museum.

Newport News built on its history as it burgeoned into a city of 181,000. The city that witnessed the birth of the modern navy during the Civil War is now one of the world's major shipbuilding centers and is recognized for its advanced military and technology facilities, as well as for its historic preservation efforts.

So, too, the leadership team of the Newport News Public Schools is drawing strength from its history and sense of community to ensure that its 33,000 students are well prepared for the future. The superintendent and school board of this urban district have made steady and impressive strides in improving academic achievement in a city where median family income is less than $40,000, where 12 percent of families live below the federal poverty level, and where military transfers produce a high rate of transiency that deeply affects many of the district's schools.

## THE 'TEAM OF EIGHT'

The district's success is based, in part, on its leaders' determination to function as a "team of eight"—seven elected board members who have resolved to speak with one voice, plus the superintendent. It is also based, in part, on shared values, an awareness of history, and continuity. "Continuity and a sense of local history play an important role in understanding the aspirations and needs of the community and establishing trust within that community as we move forward in improving the educational system for our children," says Superintendent Wayne Lett. A graduate of a Newport News high school, Lett was appointed superintendent in 1996 after seven years as the district's assistant superintendent for business and support services.

The superintendent and the school board drew on their long-term relationships with the formal and informal leaders of the community to develop the district's first strategic plan in 1998. Determined to raise academic achievement for all students, the school system engaged a diversified task force of 28 members who developed six strategies for improvement. At the top of the list: "increasing the academic performance of all students while eliminating the disparity gap." In the end, 150 citizens participated on six action teams that focused on technology, human resources, diversity, employee performance, and family and community involvement. "In developing the strategic plan, the community and school

division relied upon their shared experiences and values to forge a plan that would meet the needs of our students for years to come," says Lett.

The "team of eight" has worked closely together to implement several programs that have had an important impact on student achievement:

- ***The summer professional development program.*** The Newport News Professional Development Institute (PDI) provides teachers with summer courses in specific areas connected to their areas of responsibility and to the state's Standards of Learning (SOL). Some 200 PDI offerings are intended to hone teachers' expertise in instructional techniques and strategies, including the use of technology. The institute is funded through a state-provided SOL Teacher Training Grant; the district absorbs the cost of paying teachers to work two additional days during the summer. The approach eliminates the need to hire substitutes during the school year and ensures that students will have the most possible instructional time with their teachers.
- ***The five-year technology program.*** This $40 million technology plan will put three computers in every classroom and wire all classrooms, libraries, and offices through local- and wide-area networks. Teachers are receiving intensive training and laptop computers, making it easier for them to infuse technology into the classroom. Lett, who received a technology leadership award from the Virginia Department of Education, notes that the district's technology plan "received almost immediate support from the school board as well as from the business community, which recognized the value of technology and the need to prepare students for the workplace." The school board joined forces with the PTA and the Newport News Educational Foundation to convince the city council to fund the initiative, which has been instrumental in raising scores significantly on the SOL's technology tests, administered in grades five and eight.
- ***The Employers for Learning initiative.*** Launched at a business and education summit held in 1999, this program encourages local businesses to promote the importance of education and to help their employees take a more active role in their children's education. Conducted under the auspices of the district's Educational Foundation, the program involves 60 business executives who have pledged to implement workplace policies that support education and help employees balance home and work. Last year, the Virginia Association of Partners in Education, a state organization that promotes community involvement in schools, named the Newport News Educational Foundation the most outstanding school-business partnership in Virginia.

### COLLABORATION AND COOPERATION

While noting the importance of shared values in making decisions, the superintendent-school board team uses a variety of proven methods to foster a collective approach to addressing issues and meeting challenges. These approaches range from retreats designed to nurture understanding and cooperation to the superintendent's annual review, which allows for discussion and interaction on a broad range of issues.

Board members work hard to "speak with a single voice" in order to ensure that all students have the best educational opportunities. Calling themselves "companions in cooperation," they practice the tenets of their philosophy: to understand each other; to discuss issues sufficiently to address all concerns; to seek to achieve consensus; and, when necessary, to agree to disagree amicably.

"Perhaps we have been fortunate during my term on the board, but we have always functioned as a single unit," says John W. McMillan, Jr., vice chairman of the Newport News School Board. "We have been blessed with members who are more concerned with what is in the best interest of the children rather than their own particular agendas." If the board fails to reach agreement after allowing adequate time for discussion, its members support the decision of the majority. "When approached from the standpoint of what is best for the children," he says, "we have very few issues where we have had substantive disagreement."

### COMMUNICATION AND OPERATIONS

Another key feature of the team approach at Newport News is communication. Lett contends that giving all board members the information necessary to make sound decisions is one of the most important jobs of the superintendent. The board, which meets monthly to discuss major issues, receives weekly information packets on topics affecting students and the schools. Lett frequently briefs board members by telephone on timely issues and encourages them to call at any time with questions and concerns. Before each board meeting, Lett meets individually with each member to review the meeting agenda, provide additional information, and answer any questions.

The superintendent and the school board hold at least one annual retreat to review goals and issues. The retreats provide an atmosphere of relaxation and informality that allows individual members to be candid on various issues but to remain collectively committed to what is best for students. "We use retreats to obtain additional information on a particular issue or more basically to examine our relationships as members of the team," says McMillan. "The better we as board members can understand how we react as individuals, the better we can serve the educational needs of the school division." Each retreat, he says, has been

structured to provide additional information on an issue the board is examining, such as reading achievement, and to help board members better understand each other's personalities and views.

Each board member reviews the superintendent's performance annually, assessing how well the superintendent has advanced the educational process through leadership, interactions with staff, student achievement, educational innovation, and related areas. After gathering the individual assessments, the board chairman collates the results and leads a discussion, noting similarities and differences in the ratings.

"Since the assessment covers the wide range of issues facing a school division, our discussions also cover the gamut of those issues," explains McMillan. The discussions, which usually include the superintendent, allow for plenty of give and take. "This process provides an excellent opportunity for board members to gain additional understanding of how various members perceive these issues," he says.

Although the board has no formal self-evaluation process, McMillan views the annual evaluation of the superintendent as a process of "looking within and assessing how we as individuals and as a board are accomplishing our goals. There is no way that seven members can assess and discuss the performance of one team member without reflecting on the performance of the whole team," he says. "Our process of reviewing and discussing the variances in the ratings of the superintendent from the individual members provides that opportunity."

At its annual July 1 organizational meeting, the board elects its chairman and vice chairman for the coming year. Board members express their interests in serving on certain committees, and the chairman makes committee assignments based on those preferences and the needs of the school district. Board members gain exposure to a wide array of topics during their time in office by rotating membership on districtwide committees—such as the architectural, insurance, policy review, school health, and special education advisory committees. The board chairman also serves as a member of the Newport News Educational Foundation, and board members and the superintendent are active in several local community organizations, including the Boys and Girls Clubs, the Rotary Clubs, the Boy Scouts of America, and the United Way.

Recognizing the importance of continued community involvement, the board and superintendent have established a variety of ways to ensure citizen participation. Because some citizens are hesitant to attend formal board meetings, the school board holds at least two town meetings a year at schools to provide an open forum for residents to raise concerns, make suggestions, and ask questions. Residents have the chance to meet first with the school board at an informal

reception and then to bring any topic to the board's attention. Each speaker's questions or comments are recorded and transcribed; all board members receive them, together with written answers that are mailed to each speaker. The system enables board members to be responsive to citizens while still speaking with one voice.

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Newport News school board and superintendent offer the following advice to districts that want to increase their ability to function as a team:

- Remember that the basic purpose of a school board and a public school system is to provide the best educational opportunities for all students and to equip them with the knowledge, training, and skills to become competent and productive citizens. Keep that basic premise in the forefront at all times.
- Keep personal agendas out of public education. Board members are elected to ensure the education of all the children in their district. Single-issue candidates or those who grandstand because they have political aspirations compromise a board's unanimity and can adversely affect its ability to function.

The Newport News leadership team's commitment has led to many impressive gains in student achievement:

- Overall test results on a wide variety of measures—from the state's Standards of Learning to the SAT—have shown steady increases. For example, the percentage of students passing the eighth-grade SOL mathematics tests rose from 44 percent in 1998 to 59 percent in 2000; the percentage of eighth-graders passing the history and social science tests jumped from 23 percent in 1998 to 48 percent in 2000.
- The percentage of seniors taking the SAT has risen from 52 percent in 1997 to 61 percent in 2000. Seventy-eight percent of students go on to two- or four-year colleges.
- The number of Advanced Placement tests taken by Newport News students since 1994 has increased by 69 percent. The percentage of students receiving a passing score of three or higher (on a scale of one to five) has increased from 38 percent to 45 percent since 1996.
- Newport News Public Schools have received 12 U.S. Department of Education "blue ribbon awards"—the largest number received by any school district in Virginia. Menchville High School, a blue ribbon school, was also designated as a "New American High School" by the federal education department.
- Menchville and Warwick High School were among *Newsweek* magazine's top-rated high schools, with Menchville ranked 81 and Warwick 310 out of 13,000 high schools in the country.

- Since 1992, Newport News Public Schools have had 317 National Merit and National Achievement finalists, semifinalists, and commended students.
- For three consecutive years, SchoolMatch, an independent nationwide service, has elected Newport News Public Schools for the "What Parents Want in Public Education" award. Only 14 percent of school districts nationally are selected for this award.

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CHAPTER XIX

# Omaha Public Schools
# Omaha, Nebraska

In the late 1990s, the Omaha Public Schools were undergoing a major transition. In 1975—the year before the Nebraska district first implemented its court-ordered desegregation plan—the school system's 58,000 students were predominantly white (76 percent). African-American students accounted for 21 percent of the school population. There were few Hispanic Americans (2 percent), and even fewer Asian Americans and Native Americans (1 percent) in the school system. Nearly a quarter-century later, in 1998, this urban school system looked very different. The overall school population had decreased to 45,000, the percentage of white students had dropped to 56 percent, and the minority population had grown to 31 percent African American, 10 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent Asian American and Native American. Housing patterns had changed in many areas of the city, which meant that students in predominantly African-American neighborhoods had to endure long bus rides for integration's sake.

The school board and John Mackiel, a long-time Omaha teacher, counselor, and administrator whom the board named superintendent in 1997, recognized that the desegregation plan was no longer viable. They were also acutely aware that busing was not the only major issue facing the district. The Omaha schools were underfunded—not only in comparison with the Nebraska statewide average, but also in comparison with the nation's 100 largest city school districts. The inequities were stark: For example, the equivalent of 15 school buildings worth of space was made up of portable classrooms, which had no air conditioning. The district routinely had to close schools early when the weather became too hot.

"So tell me, how can we as a community say that in one school district—but not in others—it's OK to have a child's school experience relegated to a 25-by-36 clapboard trailer?" Mackiel was quoted as asking in a September 1999 issue of *Governing* magazine. "...We say we want to compare our scores on a national basis, but then we let our youngsters miss 10 half-days of schools because of the *weather*?"

## TAKING ON THE CHALLENGE

Major changes were needed to improve the Omaha schools. Working together as a team, the board and superintendent took on the challenge not only of tackling busing, but also of overhauling the school system to raise student achievement for all. Relying on communication and on community-building, the leadership team ultimately achieved success: Voters passed the largest bond issue in the state of Nebraska and supported the school system when it adopted a progressive student assignment plan that brought back neighborhood schools.

First, however, Omaha's 12-member school board had to make a conscious effort to avoid micromanagement and to change the often emotional and con-

frontational tone that had marked past board meetings. Workshops, biannual retreats, and executive sessions at bimonthly board meetings have given board members the chance to learn, debate, and grow. School board members have also taken leadership roles in the Council of Great City Schools, the Council of Urban Boards of Education, NSBA, and the Nebraska Association of School Boards, which gave two Omaha board members lifetime achievement awards.

In 1998, the board contracted with a consultant skilled in the Malcolm Baldrige Total Quality Management model to aid board members and key administrators in establishing the district's mission and goals during a board retreat. This experience enabled board members and the superintendent to define roles and responsibilities and discuss communication, shared values, and respect for others. "The current board feels strongly that, while they are not always going to agree on every issue, sometimes not with each other and sometimes not with the administration, you can disagree without being disagreeable," says Board President John T. Langan. "Board members understand they are modeling for students how conflicts are resolved. The presence of respect, decency, and regard for others are expectations that the board has for all students—these characteristics are modeled by each board member and staff member."

Langan adds that the board decided to air its differences in a professional manner in order to set the tone for the district. "Each person has his or her own style of processing information, a need for different amounts of information and time to come to a decision," he explains. "Understanding each other and allowing for individual differences is very constructive and healthy, and, again, the board of education models a behavior it expects in the district."

### OPEN COMMUNICATION

Sharpening communications skills was another focus for the board and superintendent, who believe that open, honest communication is essential to a good relationship. "Dr. Mackiel works on a daily basis with a 12-member board of education," says Langan. "I can tell you, as president of the board, that his ability to keep students at the center of the enterprise, address community needs, and maintain high standards for himself and his staff while maintaining open lines of communications with the 12 distinct personalities on our board is nothing short of a miracle."

Committee meetings, board meetings, informal discussions, conversations to clarify issues, and requests for additional information are all part of the communications process. The superintendent also schedules one-on-one conferences with each board member to listen, discuss, and share ideas and concerns. "It is a

blocked-out period of time with no interruptions, where board members can freely discuss any and all subjects," says Langan. "The focus is for the board member to talk and the superintendent to listen. The key district aims provide the structure for the formal meetings." The superintendent also has an open-door policy for board members, as well as for all stakeholders. This "informal, phone, stop by, healthy ongoing professional dialogue is the basic solid framework for the communication that exists between the board member and the superintendent," adds Langan.

### RESTRUCTURING THE DISTRICT

With communication flowing, Mackiel found the board receptive when he began to discuss what eventually became a major restructuring plan for the school district. First, the administration assembled a working committee, representing all divisions of the district, to prepare a tentative plan for review by board members, staff, parents, and community members. Then, the administration brought in financial experts to assess the cost implications of the plan and recommend ways to finance it. Soon, it became clear that a bond issue would be needed. Stakeholders discussed the tentative plan at informational sessions throughout the school district, and community and parent meetings were held to help people understand the proposed changes.

"After considerable information-gathering, staff presentation of the plan, workshops, retreats, research, questions, discussion, and consensus-building, the board voted to accept the student assignment plan as advanced by the administration," explains Langan. The board's position was that the plan offered "equity, fairness, choice, and commitment to an integrated student body."

Because an overhaul of the schools was part and parcel of the plan, the board also voted to go to the public for a bond election to help finance the renovation of the district's infrastructure. A parent/community group was formed to support the bond election. Board members established their leadership role by contacting their constituents and attending meetings where the bond issue was discussed. After intense community dialogue, a majority (54 percent) of voters passed the $254 million bond issue in May 1999, ensuring that the Omaha Public Schools would have the resources necessary to address critical infrastructure needs and implement the student assignment plan. Without strong communication, a clear vision, cooperation between the board and superintendent, and the ability to develop a consensus within the community, the huge undertaking would not have been successful, say the team leaders.

The plan, which is currently being implemented, means more than an end to nearly 25 years of forced racial busing. In addition to returning children to their

neighborhood schools, the plan means smaller classes in inner-city schools, the renovation of 24 schools, and the construction of three others. It expands magnet programs, which encourage voluntary integration by appealing to students' special academic interests (computer technology or international studies, for example), and it retains several options for families who choose not to send their children to their neighborhood schools. The plan also created a community oversight committee and an accountability committee to monitor the program's implementation. An African-American Achievement Committee was also formed to invite African Americans to become involved in decisions about methods to improve achievement at school and district levels.

### FUNDING INEQUITIES

While it was dealing with major changes, the district was forced to confront a variety of state laws and regulations that directly affect its operations. For example, the state imposed a dollar limit on district spending in 2001-2002, which affected the district in a number of ways, says Superintendent Mackiel. The state's added "need factor" for students in poverty and those with limited English proficiency was too low, there was no recognition of high-need special education students, and spending limits stymied curricular improvements, he says. In addition, uncertainty in funding teacher positions and salaries made it difficult to recruit teachers.

The superintendent and board have been appealing to the Nebraska legislature to remedy inequitable state funding formulas, to create a "connect" between the state decision-making body and the school district, and to understand the impact that certain laws, rules, and regulations have on the day-to-day operations of a school system. In working with the legislature, the leadership team used a school district lobbyist to provide information and to monitor legislative viewpoints and actions. At the same time, the team prepared documents comparing Omaha statistics with those of similar size districts and with the costs and demographics of adjoining city school districts. Within a four-month period, the leadership team conducted more than 75 community forums to explain the school district's financial status to stakeholders and to win support for proposed legislation. At presentations to parent-teacher groups, team members explained needs, discussed procedures for communicating with their legislators, and prepared talking points people could use to gain support for legislation.

As a result of these efforts, the legislature is gaining a greater understanding of the district's needs, Mackiel says. Bills to address Omaha's needs have been introduced and have advanced through committees. Community and school stake-

holders are voicing support for the proposed legislation. Already, changes in teacher certification rules have made the recruiting of teachers from other states more efficient, and legislative action supporting higher teacher salaries is promising, Mackiel explains.

### STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS

The school district also had to resolve issues with the state over standards and assessments. For example, a law passed in April 2000 called for the administration of state writing tests in grades four, eight, and 11. Although the Omaha schools had historically provided high-quality writing instruction, its teachers and students were not familiar with the terms and processes associated with the "trait-based" model of writing, which many other districts had used for years. With a sense of urgency, the administration, with board support, implemented a "train the trainer" model and took other immediate steps to help teachers help students demonstrate writing proficiency on the test, which was administered for the first time in February 2001. So far, the writing test is the only mandated statewide assessment.

In the early 1980s, Omaha developed its own curriculum and learning goals. The district currently uses a variety of assessments—including locally developed criterion-referenced tests—to determine student progress in meeting its goals. However, the Nebraska Department of Education has adopted its own state standards in reading/writing, mathematics, science, and social studies. The state requires districts either to adopt these standards or have their own local standards approved. The state mandates have resulted in some changes to the district's instructional and assessment programs. For example, the district has realigned concepts and processes in middle-school science. Overall, however, the state determined that Omaha's standards were more rigorous than its own and will allow the district to continue to use them.

To meet another state requirement—a systematic, ongoing process for planning, implementing, and evaluating progress—the Omaha district developed a process called Excels Plus that includes an important external evaluation component. Each school is responsible for developing a strategic plan that includes goals, strategies, and an evaluation process. Decisions are based on an analysis of student achievement data. A planning/implementation council is appointed at each school to oversee the planning process; staff, parents, and community members serve as members of the council. Each year, the school is responsible for assessing its progress toward its goals.

To make sure each school is on target, the school district steering committee and the Excels Plus staff work with the Nebraska Department of Education and

the North Central Association to create external evaluation teams. These teams usually include individuals with expertise in teaching and school administration, as well as representatives from urban schools and some Nebraska schools. When the external teams visit each school, they will review the school's plan and determine whether it is making the progress it expected.

### CHALLENGES AHEAD

The Omaha Public Schools have made great strides in the last few years, and the leadership team is proud of the district's achievements. "In the last few years, the board has been faced with major challenges in which to join together and rally," says Langan. "The development, acceptance, and implementation of a new student assignment plan, the passing of a major bond election, and the filing of major financial equity legislation have everyone focused and dedicated to the enhancement of our mission/vision."

But the Omaha leadership team still faces many challenges—ones that many other urban districts must also confront. Chief among these challenges are maintaining high-quality, equitable educational programs in the face of overly restrictive budget limitations; recruiting and retaining teachers in science, mathematics, and other high-need curricular areas; meeting the diverse language and cultural needs of urban children and their families; and keeping students from leaving the city's schools by remaining competitive with other neighboring districts.

The obstacles are daunting, but Omaha's superintendent and board are confident the district can overcome them and improve education for all its students. "The superintendent and board of education are in constant communication on issues facing the school district," says Mackiel. "A shared decision-making process and a mutual respect for the expertise of school administrators and board members have led to positive consensus in understanding the monumental challenges facing the school district and determining the best ways to meet them."

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The leadership team of the Omaha Public Schools has the following advice for other districts that want to work as a team to improve student achievement:

- Remember that the key ingredients for success are a shared focus, vision, belief, and passion for the idea that all students can and will succeed.
- Do not let personal issues, personalities, or past history and agendas become roadblocks.
- Understand data and use it to determine what needs to be done.
- Set in motion strategic short-term and long-term planning.

- Use staff development to ensure that all teachers are equipped to meet the needs of students.

The leadership team of the Omaha Public Schools has succeeded in raising student achievement and in increasing community support for the schools. The following are among the district's achievements:

- During September 1999, all schools with Academy Programs (that is, schools with 70 percent or more of their students participating in the free and reduced-price lunch program) administered the California Achievement Test, 5th edition, in grades two through six. All students also took the CAT/5 in spring 2000, enabling the district to compare student achievement from fall 1999 to spring 2000. In the area of reading, 21 of the 22 Academy Program Schools showed positive achievement, with an average gain of 7.1 NCE, or Normal Curve Equivalents. (An increase of five NCE units demonstrates meaningful academic growth.) In mathematics, all 22 Academy Program Schools showed positive NCE gains, with an average gain of 12.7 NCE units.
- The district has been successful in winning grants. The Susie Buffett Foundation, founded by a former Omaha Public Schools graduate whose children also attended the schools, funded a grant to enable the district's all-day kindergarten program to expand at three elementary schools. The Terry K. Watanbe Charitable Trust gave a grant to the Omaha Public Schools Foundation to provide professional staff members with the opportunity to increase awareness and skill development as they work with students with diverse needs. In addition, a business leader contributed time and money to several schools to increase family and community participation, academic achievement, and pride in the schools.
- Community leaders and educators collaborated to develop the X-Files Project, a new school-to-career initiative. Graduating seniors will receive a portfolio that will hold everything they might need—from transcripts to letters of recommendation—for future employment. The Chamber of Commerce will recognize student achievement by awarding certificates to students who have gained certain skills that are needed in the workplace. Potential employees can use the certificates and portfolios to make hiring decisions and to determine where additional training may be needed. In addition, the district's Career Center, which draws students from all seven high schools, offers a variety of courses—from construction to culinary arts to advanced information technology—that give students valuable preparation for the world of work.
- Other partnerships have increased opportunities for Omaha students. A joint initiative between the school system and Habitat for Humanity allows students

to provide community service while learning construction skills. An expanded partnership with the University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska Health System is giving teachers more professional development opportunities and offering students opportunities in the health sciences. The partnership is developing a comprehensive health careers track with an emphasis on recruiting minority students to the health sciences. The Metropolitan Omaha Educational Consortium—a collaborative that unites seven metropolitan Omaha districts with the College of Education of the University of Nebraska—is providing numerous staff development opportunities.

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CHAPTER XX

# Pasco County Schools
# Land O'Lakes, Florida

Just a generation ago, Pasco County, Florida, was a magnet for retirees attracted to this bucolic community on the state's west coast. Cow pastures, horse ranches, and citrus groves dotted a landscape that had few traffic lights and no speed limit. Today, many of the emblems of rural life have given way to subdivisions. The school system, which had only 12,000 students in 1973, is growing by leaps and bounds, as young families—drawn by the chance to have a piece of land, a slower pace of life, and lower taxes—move to the area. With 47,500 students, the Pasco County Schools is now the 95th largest school district in the nation and the community's largest employer.

Wanting to meet the needs of its growing and changing student body—which is becoming poorer, more culturally diverse, and more mobile—and to raise student achievement overall, district educators began to look carefully at restructuring the Pasco school system. Under the leadership of the school board and Superintendent John Long, the district has engaged in a long-term process of revamping its curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems—a restructuring so successful that the district is now recognized across the state for its high performance and innovative and challenging instructional programs and teaching practices. Open communication, respect for each other's ideas, a commitment to life-long learning, a desire to maintain stability, and the ability to anticipate problems and find solutions have enabled the leadership team to implement important changes.

From the beginning, district leaders involved the community in developing the Pasco 2001 plan—a design for restructuring schools to better prepare students for the opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. The community reached consensus on the components of the plan through active involvement in the information-gathering and brainstorming stages of the planning process, Long says. Parents, business partners, postsecondary educators, and other community representatives served as members of task forces, design teams, and school advisory councils. "Members in these groups were informed decision makers, as they were given an abundance of research and data regarding best practices for education to review and study," says Long. "Discussions held during each of these meeting sessions clarified thinking and guided consensus-building toward common goals for helping students learn."

### Learning and Caring

The leadership team, supported by the results of the community's multiyear research study, ultimately concluded that learning and caring went hand in hand. The Pasco 2001 plan embraces a concept called the Community of Connected Schools, which identifies and integrates the most promising educational practices into a comprehensive program linking prekindergarten through postsecondary

education. The concept is founded on two key principles, "continuous progress" and "continuity of caring."

Allowing children to make continuous progress at their own rate of development meant that the district needed flexible organizational arrangements and varied instructional strategies. As part of the Pasco 2001 plan, the district began to implement multiage classrooms at the elementary level, to develop "streams" of 12 interdisciplinary topics at the middle school level, and to create "learning communities," which make connections between academic study and careers, at the high school level.

To foster continuity of caring, the district gives students the chance to work together and to learn from the same group of teachers and staff for more than the usual one year. The approach creates a stable and secure learning environment and gives students, teachers, and parents more time to build relationships that foster open and productive communication, Long contends. Because the concept recognizes the needs of children and families, school sites, in collaboration with community agencies, offer counseling, health care, and other services.

Although the leadership team and many community stakeholders knew that the changes were the right approach, "buy in" from many administrators and teachers took longer. The district's leadership team understood the need for time and counseled patience, deciding to educate the staff rather than to mandate change. For example, teams of six to eight people from each school received extensive training, so they could go back and train others to implement changes. Over time, changes were made in the ways schools were built and organized—four classrooms surrounding a pod, for example—in the way teachers taught, and in their willingness to regroup students frequently and to track each student's progress carefully.

"One of the hardest things was to convince teachers that this would not go away," says Marge Whaley, a school board member elected in 1992 after working for 17 years in district administration. "When you work in a school district long enough, you see a lot of things come and go. But we stayed firm and convinced teachers that this was the best philosophy." Now, all elementary schools have "continuous progress" teams, and about 80 percent of classrooms use a team or multigrade approach.

But Whaley says the leadership team also recognized that the public might not accept certain educational ideas. Initially, for example, the district did away with letter grades on report cards, but she says that because "we did not involve parents, the whole thing blew up in our faces." The district returned to the traditional A through F grades. Says Whaley: "A lesson was learned there."

## ACCOUNTABILITY TO A WIDER PUBLIC

Even in the face of pressure, the Pasco leadership team has remained committed to the district's program. In 1999 Florida's high-stakes accountability test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), began to give all schools a grade of A through F, based on their scores on the FCAT. Although they recognized the need for accountability, Pasco's board and superintendent did not want to teach to the test or emphasize rote learning at the expense of higher-order thinking skills.

The leadership team struck a compromise, establishing alternatives and procedures to meet the demands of the state and serve its own ends as well. For example, the team encourages the use of the district's own performance outcomes and state standards as a guide for teaching and learning in the K-2 and 3-5 grade clusters, rather than using the state's specific grade-by-grade expectations. Nevertheless, students can be broken out of their groups to take the state's grade-specific tests, and the district makes sure that students are being taught the standards in order to perform well on the accountability tests.

"We're sensitive to the fact that we have to be accountable," Long says. "Our kids score at or above state averages. We do fine. If we were failing, we might have a problem with the state."

Long served in the state legislature for eight years before being elected superintendent and maintains close ties with the governor and the commissioner of education. He has put this experience to good use in Pasco, working closely on education issues with the state's legislative delegation. The district has been chosen to pilot a number of innovative technology and reading programs. Long's legislative experience also taught him "to identify all sides of an issue, how to see the 'big picture' from a state perspective rather than just one school district, how to work with committees and build teams and leaders," he says. "Negotiating skills have helped me both as a legislator and a superintendent. I also learned skills that allowed me to listen effectively to my constituents and work with other public officials."

Board members are also encouraged to work with other public officials and organizations. They are active participants in the Multiagency Coordinating Council and the Pasco Early Childhood Interagency Coordinating Council. As a result of board involvement, the school system has hammered out agreements with several county agencies and works closely with providers of prekindergarten programs, private mental health and counseling services, and other organizations.

Board members also play active roles in community-based organizations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary International, and serve on various nonprofit boards, making valuable connections that serve students. For example, because school board chairman Pam Coulter is on the board of the nonprofit

North Bay Hospital, she has been able to encourage hospital nursing staff to visit high schools, discuss the requirements of the nursing profession, and recruit students. "I'm a liaison between what is out in the community and getting the community involved in schools," she says.

### BUILDING FOR THE BOOM

These connections have served the leadership team well as they continue to confront a ongoing challenge—finding enough money to build schools to house a rapidly growing school population. The district has expanded by two or more schools per year for the past 20 years. Despite many efforts to keep pace with growth, thousands of Pasco students—a population equivalent to that of nine schools—are housed in portables. The Florida Department of Education predicts that in the next three years, the Pasco student population will increase to more than 50,000 students.

Estimating that the district will need $35 to $40 million a year to keep up with growth but will get only a fraction of that from the state, Long and the school board are looking for creative ways to finance school construction. The district is levying a school impact fee on all new homes approved to be built in Pasco County. The fee will bring in about $4 million additional dollars to build new schools. Success did not come easily—the county commission and city governments had to agree to impose the fee within their boundaries. Winning approval for the levy took a concerted effort on the part of the leadership team, which kept the media informed about the benefits of passing a school impact fee and attended a multitude of meetings with parents, the community, builders associations, and city and county governments. Having a Pasco school board member serve on the Pasco County Growth Management Committee also helped. That board member was able to communicate the school district's needs to a diverse, representative group, Long says.

The district also qualified for $16 million from the Special Infrastructure Trust (SIT) fund established by the state to reward school districts for building cost-efficient schools. Determining that the district doesn't need "monuments"—high schools that cost $50 million—Long and the board have worked with architects to design a high school that was declared the first "smart school" in the state. "There was a time when we had gorgeous schools with bell towers and tile roofs, but the board and community have accepted a more conservative approach," Long says. "Our schools aren't the prettiest, but they are very functional and they serve our educational plan." The district also built a prototype elementary school

that has been repeated seven times. "Teachers tell us how to improve it, and it gets better each time it is built," says Long.

However, parents were concerned with the safety of schools, an issue that surfaced when more than 40 focus groups came together through the district's long-term partnership with the Panasonic Foundation. Asked to say whether the district was effective in communicating and bringing together the community to meet the needs of students, many parents focused on what they perceived was a lack of safety at school. "The focus groups helped us understand that we needed to communicate to the community about how safe the schools really are," says Long.

In response to community concerns, the district is hiring a full-time police officer—whose salary will be shared by the school district and the Pasco County sheriff's office—to help schools with their crisis plans and to speak to parents, civic associations, and other groups. The officer will discuss the safety measures, such as counseling, peer mediation, lockdowns, and crisis drills, that the Pasco schools have already taken.

## ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVENESS

The leadership team has been able to be flexible, responsive to concerns, and creative in its problem solving for a number of reasons. For one, it is devoted to continuing education. The board and the superintendent invest time studying new strategies to improve the school environment and increase student learning. Once a month, they hold workshops around key concepts and district projects, asking tough questions of each other and the staff. "We hold two board meetings a month, one in the morning and one at night. During the morning meeting we have a workshop, which keeps board members up to speed on a wide range of issues," says Long. "They need to have data, they need to be involved. When a parent calls with a complaint, they need to know how to respond." The board almost always chooses the topic, and after a short staff presentation, the workshop opens up to dialogue, which helps the school administration understand the needs of the community as much as it helps board members understand a wide range of school issues, says Long.

Stable leadership has been another factor in the team's effectiveness, allowing the district to undertake major changes that can be fully implemented only over an extended period of time. Most key district staff members have held their positions for many years. Long was a leader in the district for more than 23 years before being elected superintendent in 1996; he is now in his second term. "We have top people and we retain them because we have confidence in them and respect for them. Because there's very little turnover, we have consistency and continuity," says Board Chairman Pam Coulter. "When a new idea is introduced, we

can say, 'We've tried this before, and here is why we are doing it or not doing it.' That makes my role easier," she adds.

The school board members want to help ensure stability. When a board member decides not to run again, he or she will begin to look around for a satisfactory replacement, says Whaley. "Usually, a board member has heard from someone who would be interested if the board member ever decided not to run again.... Someone might say, 'I think I would like to do that [job] sometime in the future.' So the board member would sit down with that person or persons and talk about the job, find out why they wanted to run, and so forth."

The board and the superintendent have also developed a clear understanding of each other's roles. "We are basically a policy-making board, and we make sure we don't get involved in day-to-day administration," says Coulter. "That's Dr. Long's job. What makes it so easy is that he does his job so effectively." In fact, Long does his job so well that the Florida Association of District School Superintendents named him 2000 Florida Superintendent of the Year. The organization recognized him for managing Pasco County's student population growth, reducing administrative costs, showing consistent leadership in student test scores, fostering community involvement, and demonstrating visionary leadership.

### LOOKING AHEAD

The Pasco school board and superintendent are widely known as forward thinkers and planners—skills they need to cope with the explosive pace of growth and a potential teacher shortage. "Our school members are greatly concerned about the future and push us to stay on top of changes," Long notes. For example, the district actively looks for ways to recruit teachers, offering scholarships to paraprofessionals to encourage them to return to school and earn teaching degrees. The district also recruits teachers who live in the Northeast and Midwest, sending staff to those places during snowstorms to try to entice teachers to the sunshine state. Long recently learned that a new teachers college will be built on the Pasco County line, and he plans to offer pre-employment contracts to the students, assuring them of jobs in his district once they complete their education.

Preparing for an influx of students, the leadership team is also exploring alternate school calendars. A Time and Opportunity Committee made up of parents, school board members, teachers, administrators, and community leaders meets regularly to study and discuss extended day programs and other options. Committee members have visited schools that use nontraditional school calendars. The committee will make formal recommendations once it has completed its research.

While planning for the future, the leadership team also concentrates on steady, incremental change. "Many steps are taken to make sure that our schools and district are moving toward accomplishing the goals developed in the Pasco 2001 plan," says Long. "At every major district, community, or school function, we review our district vision and goals." All schools and district departments engage their staffs in identifying annual goals and strategies. All teachers and administrators write annual improvement and "stretch goals" as part of their professional development plans. All school board members review and approve each school's continuous improvement plan, offering feedback and additional information. "Each year, we look for a different emphasis in the continuous improvement plans," says Coulter. "This past year, we focused on student achievement, school safety issues, and community involvement/parental involvement. We also look to see whether goals from the previous year have been met. If we are dissatisfied, we mention it to the appropriate assistant superintendent who is responsible for the school."

While Pasco is facing challenges, its leadership team has the experience and commitment—as well as the appropriate structures and processes in place—to guide the district in steadily raising student achievement and meeting children's needs. "At a time when there is greater pressure from the state and the public for higher test scores, it would be easy to fall into a drill-and-practice mode and be satisfied to maintain the status quo," says Long. But the Pasco team is not one to accept the status quo. It will be satisfied only when each student reaches his or her highest potential.

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Pasco leadership team offers the following advice to other districts that want to improve their teamwork in order to focus on student achievement:

- Remember that the first priority of the superintendent and school board, acting as a team, is to provide an environment conducive to learning.
- Consistently identify forums and other ways to inform all staff members about district priorities and beliefs.
- Listen to the community, and do not try to solve all problems alone.
- Use data from many sources in making decisions, set district priorities based on the data, and adhere to your goals even when challenges test your commitment.
- Understand that change initiatives take time and require encouragement from key leaders. Remember that change does not happen without incurring a few bumps and bruises along the way.

The superintendent and school board of Pasco County have led the district in making steady progress in students' academic achievement. Among their successes are the following:

- For the last five years, Pasco's composite scores on the Scholastic Assessment Test have remained above both state and national scores, even though the numbers of students taking the test continue to increase.
- On the Stanford Achievement Test 8, Pasco students score at or near the national average on the Basic Battery Total at all levels.
- Scores on the writing section of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test have increased over time and compare favorably with state averages. The percentage of students meeting the state's standards of 3.0 for satisfactory writing has increased significantly.
- On the state's 1996 High School Competency Test, Pasco had the highest percentage of students passing in the state and continues to score among the top 10 districts annually.
- Under the state's new accountability system which introduces higher, more stringent standards, the overwhelming majority of Pasco schools were rated as making satisfactory progress or better. No Pasco school received a failing grade.
- Student attendance rates have remained stable over the past several years, averaging 93.7 percent for elementary schools, 91.3 percent for middle schools, and 91.7 percent for high schools.
- Pasco graduation rates have shown improvement over time and exceed the state graduation rates, while the statewide average continues to decline.
- Parents show a high level of satisfaction with the education their children are receiving in Pasco County. Eighty percent of parents report that the schools provide a good education, and 89 percent report that their son or daughter likes school.

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CHAPTER XXI

# SITKA SCHOOL DISTRICT
# SITKA, ALASKA

When Alaska was under Russian control, Sitka was established in 1799 as the headquarters of the first Russian governor. Today, Sitka is a community of some 8,500 people—28 percent of whom are of Alaska Native descent. Located on Baranof Island in the heart of the Tongass National Forest, Sitka offers natural beauty and history, attracting visitors who come to view wildlife or to learn about Russian and Tlingit cultures.

In 1993, however, the area was suffering economically from the closure of a pulp mill, which cost the community 20 percent of its jobs and 25 percent of its income. As people left in search of new opportunities, school district enrollment declined, while, at the same time, the percentage of students with severe disabilities climbed. The school board and superintendent accomplished little: They were locked in a dysfunctional relationship, not trusting each other nor respecting each other's roles. As a result, board members met eight or nine times a month in attempts to deal with a myriad of details—most of which should have been handled by administrators.

### Transforming a Troubled District

The Sitka school board realized that the school district had to change and improve, lest the community lose complete faith in its public schools. The board decided to take the steps necessary to ensure a high-functioning district that was focused on student achievement. First, the school board hired a new superintendent. Then, by clarifying roles, reducing the frequency and duration of board meetings in order to focus on essentials, and putting into effect a strategic plan based on broad-based community involvement and support, the leadership began to transform the district.

"The focus on students that has resulted from this approach has been the foundation for the board/superintendent relationship and the stability in leadership and staffing the district has enjoyed, in spite of unanticipated hardships the community has suffered," says Carl Rose, executive director of the Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB). "We believe this unwavering focus has allowed the board and superintendent to stand strong at times when outside forces might have eroded their resolve, and has allowed them to handle inevitable disagreements agreeably, without damaging the integrity of their purpose."

A flashback to 1993 reveals how far the district has come. When former Superintendent John Holst arrived eight years ago, the board was meeting frequently and spending most of its time micromanaging. As Holst and the board began to develop a relationship of trust, the board quickly agreed to meet once a month—a decision that allowed it to focus on board business rather than on administrative details. Holst, who retired as superintendent in July 2001, says he

built the board's trust by being honest, sometimes even "brutally honest," and by adhering to two guidelines: "The first rule is, 'The board is always right.' The second rule is, 'When it appears that the board is going the wrong way, refer to rule number one.'" Holst says his job is to give the board all the information necessary to make good decisions and to make recommendations as well. "I must trust that the board members will collectively make the best decision, even if it differs from my own," he says, adding that he implements every board decision—whether he agrees with it or not—with the "same vigorous support as the decision that does follow my recommendation."

Still, the monthly meetings sometimes lasted until midnight. Rather than add another meeting, the board and superintendent pared down the agenda, eliminating administrative issues that were not necessary for the board to decide. To clearly define their roles, the board and superintendent sought and received guidance from AASB. The board jealously guarded policy making and decisions that affected the direction of the district, while the superintendent and his administrative team remained clearly focused on implementation.

The board and superintendent also agreed to call areas where overlap might normally occur the "gray zone." Holst recalls that 150 angry parents once attended a board meeting to voice concern over an issue, and board members tried to resolve the problem right then and there. Holst says he told the board, "We are probably operating in the gray zone on this item." Understanding what Holst meant, a board member moved to direct the superintendent to investigate the issue and make recommendations to the board. Holst reported back at the next meeting, and the issue was resolved. "It was a great example of 'role definition' and how to keep it clear," he says. "No one in the room except the board members had any idea of what the 'gray zone' reference meant."

### COLLABORATIVE PLANNING

When the superintendent introduced the idea of strategic planning, the leadership team began to collaborate with all segments of the staff and community, including civic organizations and political entities such as the City Assembly and the Sitka Tribe of Alaska. The planning groups developed the district's first strategic plan, which continues to serve as the guiding force for all decision making by the board and the superintendent. "The plan has provided a blueprint for student achievement that focused on total alignment of curriculum, assessments, and resources with established student performance standards," notes the AASB's Rose. "The board and superintendent have kept the plan alive by annual reviews

that provide accountability to the community and an opportunity for everyone to continue shaping it to serve students."

To hone their skills as board members, the board travels to Anchorage for training on a variety of issues affecting school boards—including budgeting, student performance, standards and assessments, board-superintendent relationships, insurance, and legal issues. In addition to the yearly training, the board typically has training on the local level at least once a year, and more as issues present themselves.

Board members also use self-evaluations to help them deal effectively with each other, the superintendent, and the general public. "By doing self-evaluations, the board can look at how we are doing and whether all the members see themselves in the same light," says Board President Fred Reeder. In analyzing its strengths and weaknesses, the board realized that communications with the community needed improvement. The board has tried a variety of techniques—such as surveys, open forums, letters home to parents, and newspaper articles—to obtain meaningful community input, says Reeder.

### ACADEMIC INTERVENTIONS

Early in his tenure, Holst became especially concerned about the number of 10th-grade students who had lost at least one credit during their freshman year. Interviews with each student and with some dropouts revealed that school failure had a high correlation to poor reading skills. The students could not read well enough to be successful in content areas, such as social studies, that required large amounts of reading. The leadership team realized that the inability to read was leading to students' frustration, their lack of academic progress, and eventually to the decision to drop out of school.

A committee reviewed the district's reading programs, concluding that significant numbers of students were not learning to read in the primary grades. Resolving to put a major emphasis on reading, the district adopted two nationally known reading programs—Reading Recovery and Lindamood-Bell—and supported additional training for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators. Reviewing student scores and needs became the basis of a Goals 2000 grant to support reading efforts, assessment, and teacher training and resources. Since that original grant, the district has obtained five others, broadened to support writing and mathematics.

The attention to reading is having a positive impact on achievement. Previously, a typical third-grade teacher had six or eight students who were reading significantly below grade level. That number is now down to one or two, and these are generally students with major language deficiencies or other special

needs. Before, more than 25 percent of students performed in the lowest quartile in primary grades; with interventions, the district has reduced that percentage to 6-11 percent.

Academically, another key initiative was developing and aligning standards, which the board made a priority very early on, notes Holst. The district had been collecting and analyzing longitudinal data about student performance in all content areas for six years, giving the board and superintendent a solid base of information. The leadership team brought an internationally known standards consultant to Sitka to work directly with the staff. In addition, the district created a full-time position for a classroom teacher to help align curriculum with state standards and develop assessment tools that can be used districtwide as well as in individual classrooms. The board has protected this position in times of budget reductions. "The board members are so strongly committed to keeping this effort moving along that they were willing to make other sacrifices in favor of becoming a standards-based district," says Holst. A new student reporting system, based on standards, is being piloted districtwide in the fall of 2001.

### COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Building a better relationship with the Alaska Native population was also very important to the leadership team. Although the school population is about 30 percent Alaska Native, the district, by its own admission, had done very little to make members of that group a real part of its activities. Now, after a concerted effort to change, the district makes sure there is at least one member of the Native community on every hiring committee and a representative number of Native community members on every board-appointed committee or task force. The board holds its regular March meeting in the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) Hall and has developed a partnership with ANB and its sisterhood for a "Welcome Back to School" dinner and program each September. In the past eight years, the percent of certificated staff has gone from 2.2 percent Native to 9 percent. Although no Native community member is currently on the school board, in the past the board has had a Native member, who raised board members' awareness of Native society and culture, notes Reeder.

To increase community participation, the school board learned to listen to the views of advocacy groups through a process that emphasizes fairness. "If the question is about a schedule change, we always have a motion of the floor adopting the proposed change, then giving each person an equal opportunity to speak for or against the change," explains Reeder. "In all ideas or proposed changes, there will be one group or another who will try to have their way. If you make sure that

each group is heard, then the board can better evaluate the merits of the proposed change."

The board also meets quarterly with the City Assembly, the local source of funding—but money matters are not the only issues raised, Reeder says. By discussing the school district's problems and successes, the board has helped members of local government understand the workings of the school system. "Some of the topics discussed have been, of course, budgets, but others have been sports teams, the high school qualifying exam, standards and assessments, technology as it pertains to the district, and student learning," says Reeder. "We have found that now when we talk with them, they understand our problems better and we understand theirs." The dialogue has led to increased tax support at the local level for Sitka schools.

### MEETING CHALLENGES

Funding continues to be a key issue in the district, however—in large part because the district already had one of the lowest per-pupil expenditures in the state and because it had fallen on hard times economically. During the last significant change in the state's funding formula, in 1997, Holst and Reeder spent a considerable amount of time lobbying state legislators to make changes in a funding bill that would benefit not only Sitka but the state as a whole. The bill moved through the legislature carrying many of the provisions suggested by the Sitka leadership. Ultimately, Sitka received the second highest percentage increase in state funding in Alaska.

Other industries have taken up some of the slack left by the closing of the pulp mill, and more fishing families are relocating to Sitka thanks to an expanded harbor. Even so, the district's enrollment has declined by approximately 23 percent since fall 1993. At the same time, there has been a dramatic rise in the numbers of students with severe special needs in Sitka—about double the increases seen elsewhere. The district has coped by adding special education teachers and by reassigning paraprofessionals to work directly with students who need one-to-one supervision, under the guidance of a special educator. Sitka also partnered with a local health-care provider, which placed 12 employees in the schools to work directly with students who are under the provider's care outside the school day. Because the district believes in full inclusion, a large adult staff is a necessity. "One of the unfortunate benefits of our programs is that we are attracting students from other communities, thus exacerbating an already difficult situation," explains Holst. "And since Alaska school districts operate under a flat percent adjustment to meet special education needs, resources are constantly being drained from regular education programs to meet those needs."

Yet because of the trust and good will built up between the superintendent and board and between the leadership and the community, economic woes proved to be the "ties that bind" rather than the ones that divide. "Our schools continue to improve in spite of declining enrollments and declining funding," says Holst. "It is a true measure of the tenacity of the board to keep the district on track toward program improvement in the 'worst of times.'"

To keep the budget process as fair as possible, the board holds a public budget hearing at each school building, a process that allows parents and staff to voice their needs and concerns. The board never allows the discussion to center on "what to cut in someone else's building," says Holst, but insists that patrons deal with their own building's programs and priorities. "We have always been very conscious of not pitting buildings and programs against each other," he adds. In addition, because the board works from the list of priorities developed in the budget hearings, the budget belongs to the community and not to the board.

Although Holst has retired, the district as a whole enjoys stability in its leadership and staff. "When we hire someone, we expect that it is a decision that will last 20 years," he says. The district invests in its staff by offering a variety of capacity-building opportunities, as well as encouraging direct involvement in the decision-making process where it affects teaching and learning. Each year, the board president gives tokens of recognition to employees who have reached 15, 20, or 25 years of service. The employees truly appreciate being honored for their many years of service," says Holst. "The recipients of these awards cherish them like nothing I have ever seen."

### ADVICE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The Sitka school board and its former superintendent, John Holst, have a few suggestions for other districts that want to work as a team to foster student achievement. The suggestions include:

- Choose a superintendent you trust and hand over the operations of the district to that person.
- Work to develop mutual and reciprocal trust.
- Keep the issue of student achievement at the forefront of every board meeting—as an agenda item, status report, program review, or action item.
- Encourage board members to get the training they need to be effective, and urge them to become actively involved in their state school board association.
- Make sure board members remember that their power lies in their actions as a board, not their actions as individuals.

By focusing on student achievement, Sitka's educational leaders have been responsible for many improvements in the district. Accomplishments include the following:

- Student achievement has improved in a sustained and consistent manner, especially in reading—the first area of focus. For example, about 66 percent of Sitka's third-grade students who took a state test in March 2000 read on a "proficient" level, compared with about 58 percent of other Alaskan third-graders. Sitka's six-graders and eighth-graders did better at "advanced" levels of reading than did other students in the state.
- More Native students are receiving high school diplomas than in the past.
- Compared with other neighboring districts in Southeast Alaska, Sitka enjoys positive press coverage and parental support.
- The district has attracted hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants. Its grant monies support areas that are the most difficult to protect in the budget process—such as staff development, technology purchases and training, and efforts to become a standards-based district.
- The district has won the respect of the State Department of Education for the quality of its education and the stability of its leadership and staff.

*For more information, contact:*
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Sitka, AK 99835
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# Resources on Board-Superintendent Relations

1. Abrams, Marc and Benjamin O. Canada. "The Care and Feeding of the Superintendent; a Candid Conversation about the Most Important Relationship in Your School District." *American School Board Journal* 187, no. 4 (April 2000): 42-45.

Interspersed with humor, this article records a conversation between a board member and superintendent in Portland, Oregon, about potential points of tension, the appropriate roles of the board and the superintendent, and ways the relationship can be improved. This is an informative, honest, and entertaining look at the subject.

2. American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association. *Roles and Relationships: School Boards and Superintendents.* Revised edition, AASA, 1994. 16 pp.

This joint position statement by a committee made up of the boards of directors of both AASA and NSBA was originally developed in 1980 and then updated in 1994 to reflect changes in society as well as evolving roles and relationships. The publication provides a detailed and clear statement of school boards' and superintendents' specific responsibilities in the context of public school governance and administration.

Available from the American Association of School Administrators, 703-528-0700.

3. Basom, Margaret R., Suzie Young, and Ted Adams. "Getting Better at Building Superintendent-School Board Relations." *ERS Spectrum* 17, no. 3 (summer 1999): 23-25.

"One of the school district superintendent's most important jobs is to build a productive working relationship with the school board. In this paper, [the authors] discuss approaches for achieving a successful superintendency. They surveyed members of the Superintendency Institute of America, Inc., for their comments on strategies that have worked for them in striving to build and maintain a positive and trusting superintendent/board relationship. Building trust, maintaining focus, communicating effectively, teaching the board, and being politically savvy were topics highlighted by participating superintendents as integral to the effective management of the superintendent's position."

4. "Effective Superintendent-School Board Relations." *Leaders' Edge* (a Publication of the American Association of School Administrators) 1, no. 1: 1-4.

The first section provides skill-building tips on the most cited keys to a strong board-superintendent relationship; in the next section two superintendents share how they

established successful working relationships with their boards; and the final section provides references and resources for additional information on this topic.

5. Fulbright, Luann and Richard H. Goodman. "Ten Things Superintendents Can Do to Create and Maintain an Effective School Governance Team." *ERS Spectrum* 17, no. 4 (fall 1999): 3-11.

Working together as an effective school governance team has proven difficult for boards and superintendents in many districts. In this article, the authors draw on their experience and research to recommend ten key ways in which superintendents can create and maintain an effective governance team.

6. Gemberling, Katheryn W., Smith, Carl W. and Joseph S. Villani. *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook*. Alexandria VA, National School Boards Association, 2000. 96 pp.

The Key Work of School Boards is a framework created by NSBA to help school boards raise student achievement through community engagement as well as to become maximally effective in their role as community leaders. The *Key Work Guidebook* provides board members with concrete action tools in the eight "key" action areas on which successful boards have focused their attention: vision, standards, assessment, accountability, resource alignment, climate, collaboration, and continuous improvement. The section on collaboration is particularly pertinent to the subject of board-superintendent relations.

Available from the National School Boards Association, 800-706-6722.

7. Goodman, Richard H. and William G. Zimmerman. *Thinking Differently: Recommendations for 21st Century School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement*. Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service and New England School Development Council (NESDEC), 2000.

This report spells out what the authors, guided by a broad-based panel of national educators (the National Advisory Committee on School Board/Superintendent Leadership, Governance, and Teamwork for High Student Achievement) believe must be done to develop and strengthen local board/superintendent leadership to attain the overriding goal of high achievement for every child. The authors make recommendations for changes in state laws, in local policies, in the graduate and continuing education of superintendents, and in developing local board-superintendent leadership teams. They identify seven key strategies to strengthen school board/superintendent leadership and teamwork.

Available from the Educational Research Service, 800-791-9308 or on the NESDEC Web site, www.nesdec.org/Thinking_Differently.htm.

8. Goodman, Richard H., Fulbright, Luann and William G. Zimmerman. *Getting There From Here; School Board-Superintendent Collaboration: Creating a School Governance Team Capable of Raising Student Achievement.* Arlington, VA: New England School Development Council and Educational Research Service, 1997.

Why do conflicts and confusion reign in some board rooms across this nation and not in others? What makes it possible for some boards and school superintendents to work well together to achieve district goals? And what gets in the way of effective school leadership? In the fall of 1996, the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) decided that these questions must be answered if we are to obtain higher student achievement in every school. With the support of a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, NESDEC formed a research team that launched a year-long national study focused on school board-superintendent collaboration for higher student achievement. The goal of the research was to identify outstanding examples of school board-superintendent teamwork, and from them, develop recommendations that could help every school board and superintendent in America become an effective team working together for higher student achievement. These recommendations are the focus of *Getting There from Here.*

Available from the Educational Research Service, 1-800-791-9308.

9. Iowa Association of School Boards. "School Boards and Student Achievement: a Comparison of Governance in High- and Low-Achieving Districts." *ERS Spectrum* 19, no. 1 (winter 2001): 38-46.

This article examines the question of the role that school board governance practices play in raising student achievement. It describes a study by a research team of the Iowa Association of School Boards, which sought to identify governance characteristics of high- and low-achieving school districts. Extensive on-site interviews in six school districts revealed that the understandings and beliefs of school boards in high-achieving districts differed 'markedly' from those in low-achieving districts." Board/superintendent teams in districts where schools have consistently generated unusually low levels of achievement were compared with teams in districts where schools have generated unusually high achievement over a period of several years. Shared leadership was found to be one of the seven key conditions for effective school renewal.

10. Katz, Malcolm. "Matching School Board and Superintendent Styles; One Way to Reduce the Stylistic Friction Between Parties." *The School Administrator* 50, no. 2 (February 1993): 16-23.

Often the source of conflict in board-superintendent relations is not over issues or operational problems, but in how these things are handled. This can result from a mismatch in leadership styles between the superintendent and the board as a whole. This article

discusses existing research on leadership styles and applies it to school administrators. Board behaviors are described along a continuum from corporate to familial board styles. Finally, the consequences of style mismatches between superintendent and board styles are explored, and actions to improve the situation recommended.

11. Marlowe, John. "When Bad Things Happen to Good Superintendents." *American School Board Journal* 188, no. 4 (April 2001): 30-33.

This article discusses the strange but all-too-common phenomenon of unexpected rifts between good superintendents and well-meaning boards that can lead to the superintendent's dismissal. The author concludes that the four major causes of this sudden-death syndrome are: (1) priorities become mismatched, (2) problems are not seen, (3) special-interest groups interfere, and (4) internal divisions get transferred. Examples are given for each cause. The article concludes with advice to boards and superintendents on how to prevent these conflicts as well as minimize the damage to the school district when they do occur.

12. National School Boards Association. *Becoming a Better Board Member: A Guide to Effective School Board Service.* Alexandria VA, NSBA, 1996. 325 pp.

NSBA's objectives in this publication were to shorten the learning curve that faces any new school board member and to provide a compendium of advice and information to help both new and veteran board members govern schools more effectively. Emphasis is placed on understanding how lay board members and professional educators can work together, and with the public, to deliver excellence and equity in public education. Topics covered in depth include roles and responsibilities of school boards, strategic planning, board meetings, leadership roles, public communication, finance, curriculum, collective bargaining, and selecting, communicating with, and evaluating the superintendent.

Available from the National School Boards Association, 800 706-6722.

13. National School Boards Association. *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement.* Alexandria VA, NSBA, 2000. 67 pp.

This publication features case studies of 15 school districts doing exemplary work in the area of community engagement to promote student achievement. One of the major criteria for inclusion was engagement of internal publics such as teachers, students, and administrators in addition to external publics such as parents and community leaders.

Available from the National School Boards Association, 800-706-6722.

14. Negroni, Peter J. "The Right Badge of Courage." *The School Administrator* 56, no. 2 (February 1999): 14-16.

A superintendent discusses the need for superintendents to meet new role expectations and work with boards to solve problems and sustain progress in the district over time.

15. Ondrovich, Peggy. "'Hold Them, Fold Them, or Walk Away,' Twelve Cardinal Rules for Dealing With School Board Conflict." *The School Administrator* 54, no. 2 (February 1997): 12-15.

This article by a superintendent discusses the process of conflict resolution between board members and administrators and presents 12 sensible "cardinal rules" for dealing with inevitable conflict situations.

16. Price, William J. "Policy Governance Revisited." *The School Administrator* 58, no. 2 (February 2001): 46-48, 50.

The author reflects on his own experiences with policy governance from a perspective as both a former superintendent and university professor who trains future superintendents. He concludes that given the complex nature of education today, it is not always realistic to carve separate, rigid, and distinct roles for board members and superintendents. Contains a box with bibliographic information on two articles on policy governance from the March 2000 issue of *The School Administrator.*

17. Reeves, Kimberly. "Tying the Contract Knot." *The School Administrator* 58, no. 2 (February 2001): 22-30.

This article discusses some of the issues pertinent to negotiating superintendent contracts in an age of unpredictable relationships between superintendents and school boards. Contains a sidebar discussing the differences in how board and superintendent associations view contracts, and a sidebar discussing the role of the school attorney in considering contracts.

18. "Stress Teamwork, Not Turmoil, Urban Educators Agree." *Urban Advocate* (Published by the National School Boards Association) (January 2001-February 2001): 1,7.

Three prominent urban educators—Arlene Ackerman, Rudy Crew, and Gerry House—were asked by the *Urban Advocate* to share their thoughts on school board-superintendent relations and the role they play in the success of urban education. The three offered suggestions for ways boards and superintendents can cooperate better for the benefit of students.

# About the Authors

**Ellen H. Henderson**, APR, serves as director of member services at the South Carolina School Boards Association. A former newspaper reporter and editor, she has worked in educational communications for 25 years. She holds a BA and an MA in journalism from the University of South Carolina and is an accredited member of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). She is a past chair of the Council of School Boards Association Communicators (COSBAC) and past president of the South Carolina Chapter of NSPRA.

**Jeannie (Sis) Henry** assumed the post of executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) in September 2001. Prior to joining GSBA, she worked for 22 years with the South Carolina School Boards Association, most recently as deputy executive director.

Henry has served as president of the National School Public Relations Association and past chair of the Council of School Board Association Communicators (COSBAC). She is the recipient of the Thomas A. Shannon Award for Excellence in School Boards Association Leadership given annually by the National School Boards Association. In June 2001, she was presented the Order of the Palmetto—the highest award that can be given to a civilian by a South Carolina governor—by Governor Jim Hodges.

**Judith Brody Saks** has more than 25 years experience as an education writer and editor. She began her career as an education reporter for *The Boston Globe*. Later, she was a senior editor of *American School Board Journal*, an award-winning monthly magazine published by the National School Boards Association.

As a freelance writer, Saks has written trade paperback books for the National School Boards Association on charter schools and character education, as well as case studies in public engagement for *The Community Connection*. Currently, she is an editor in the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Office of Grants and Special Programs. She also has taught college journalism, worked as a publications director for two nonprofit associations, and was a Congressional Fellow of the American Political Science Association.

Saks serves as vice president of the Washington Independent Writers Legal and Educational Fund. She holds a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism.

**Anne Wright** is manager of surveys, studies, and evaluations at the National School Boards Association. She has 20 years of experience in the fields of research and writing and has produced a variety of reports and publications for NSBA. Among them are *Reaching for Excellence*, a survey of student achievement issues and *The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement.*

She holds a bachelor's of arts in government and public administration and a master's degree in business administration, both from American University.

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# Publications Available from the National School Boards Association

*Becoming a Better Board Member: A Guide to Effective School Board Leadership* (325 pp.). A bestseller that contains useful information on the evolving concerns affecting today's school board leaders. Item # 01-103-SA. National Affiliate price: $28; regular price: $35.

*The Community Connection: Case Studies in Public Engagement* (68 pp.). Case studies of 15 school districts nationwide that have engaged their communities to improve student achievement. Item # 04-119-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*Communities Count: A School Board Guide to Community Engagement* (33 pp.), by Michael A. Resnick. Guides school board members though the community engagement process. Item # 11-125-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*The Key Work of School Boards: A Guidebook* (95 pp.), by Katheryn W. Gemberling, Carl W. Smith, and Joseph S. Villani. Guides school board members through the eight essential elements of improving student achievement: vision, standards, assessment, accountability, resource alignment, climate, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Item # 09-140-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*Raising the Bar: A School Board Primer on Student Achievement* (56 pp.), by Gerald Bracey and Michael A. Resnick. A guide to effective decision making, proven processes, and activities that enhance the school board's leadership role in student achievement. Item # 11-121-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*Reaching for Excellence: What Local School Districts Are Doing to Raise Student Achievement* (84 pp.). Reports results of a survey of 2,000 school districts on critical student achievement issues. Item # 04-118-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*Reinventing School-Based Management: A School Board Guide to School-Based Improvement* (66 pp.), by Darrel Drury. Offers guidance for developing a new approach to school-based decision making through school-based improvement. Item # 11-122-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

*Team Leadership for Student Achievement: The Roles of the School Board and the Superintendent,* by Ellen H. Henderson, Jeannie Henry, Judith Brody Saks, and Anne Wright. Addresses the roles of board members and superintendents and profiles

districts that have developed successful, productive leadership teams for student achievement. Item # 09-141-SA. National Affiliate price: $16; regular price: $20.

These books may be ordered by calling the NSBA Distribution Center at 800-706-6722. Postage is $7 for orders up to $100.00 and 7 percent for orders over $100.01. To view additional NSBA publications, go to http://www.nsba.org.

# Publications Available from the American Association of School Administrators

*Building Better Board/Administrator Relations: Problems and Solutions,* by Jack McCurdy, 1993. Item # 0-87652-180-4.

*Career Crisis in the Superintendency,* by Bruce Cooper Lance D Fusarelli and Vincent A. Carella, 2000. Item # 0-87652-247-9.

*Coming Clean About Organizational Change: Leadership in the Real World,* by Jerry Patterson, 1997. Item # 0-87652-229-0.

*Effective School District Management: A Self-Review Instrument and Guide,* by Fred Dembowski with Carl Ekstrom, 1999. Item # 0-87652-237-1.

*Preparing Schools and School Systems for the 21st Century,* by Frank Whithrow, with Harvey Long and Gary Marx, 1999. Item # 0-87652-235-5.

*Professional Standards for the Superintendency,* by John R. Hoyle and the AASA Commission on Standards for the Superintendency, 1993. Item # 0-87652-202-9.

*Skills for Successful 21st Century School Leaders,* 3rd edition, by John Hoyle, Fenwick English and Betty Steffy, 1998. Item # 0-87652-234-7.

*Total Leaders: Applying the Best Future-Focused Change Strategies to Education,* by Chuck J. Schwahn and William G. Spady, 1998. Item # 0-87652-233-9.

*2000 Study of the American Superintendency: A Look at the Superintendent of Education in the New Millennium,* by Tom Glass, Lars Bjork and C. Cryss Brunner, 2000. Item # 0-87652-248-7 (hardcover); item # 0-87652-245-2 (softcover).

These books may be ordered by calling 800-462-6420 or online at http://www.scarecroweducation.com.

# ABOUT NSBA...

The National School Boards Association is the nationwide organization representing public school governance. NSBA's mission is to foster excellence and equity in public elementary and secondary education through school board leadership. NSBA achieves its mission by representing the school board perspective before federal government agencies and with national organizations that affect education, and by providing vital information and services to state associations of school boards and local school boards throughout the nation.

NSBA advocates local school boards as the ultimate expression of grassroots democracy. NSBA supports the capacity of each school board—acting on behalf of and in close concert with the people of its community—to envision the future of education in its community, to establish a structure and environment that allow all students to reach their maximum potential, to provide accountability for the people of its community on performance in the schools, and to serve as the key community advocate for children and youth and their public schools.

Founded in 1940, NSBA is a not-for-profit federation of associations of school boards across the United States and its territories. NSBA represents the nation's 95,000 school board members that govern 14,890 local school districts serving the nation's more than 47 million public school students. Virtually all school board members are elected; the rest are appointed by elected officials.

NSBA policy is determined by a 150-member Delegate Assembly of local school board members. The 25-member Board of Directors translates this policy into action. Programs and services are administered by the NSBA executive director and a 150-person staff. NSBA is located in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

·NSBA·

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Excellence and Equity in Public Education through School Board Leadership

# About AASA...

The American Association of School Administrators is the oldest and largest organization of local school district leaders, serving 15,000 school superintendents and other school system leaders. As the professional association for superintendents, AASA has unique access to and credibility with school system gatekeepers. At the Washington area headquarters, a staff of 55 works to further AASA's mission to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children and to address the following priorities:

- Improving the condition of children and youth;
- Preparing schools and school systems for the 21st century;
- Connecting schools and communities; and
- Enhancing the quality and effectiveness of school leaders.

The association addresses these priorities through lobbying members of Congress and the Executive Branch; providing resources and professional development for members; and working in strategic alliances and partnerships with other national education associations.

AASA publishes an award-winning monthly journal, *The School Administrator,* and *Governance and Leadership,* a quarterly publication that reaches every superintendent and school board president in the nation. The AASA Web site is an outstanding source of current information on education research and practice and is visited 1,500 times each day. The association partners with Scarecrow Education to publish books on topics of importance to school system leaders. AASA maintains unique access to school district leaders and has the capacity to deliver information directly to them.

AASA is governed by an Executive Committee elected by the membership.

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